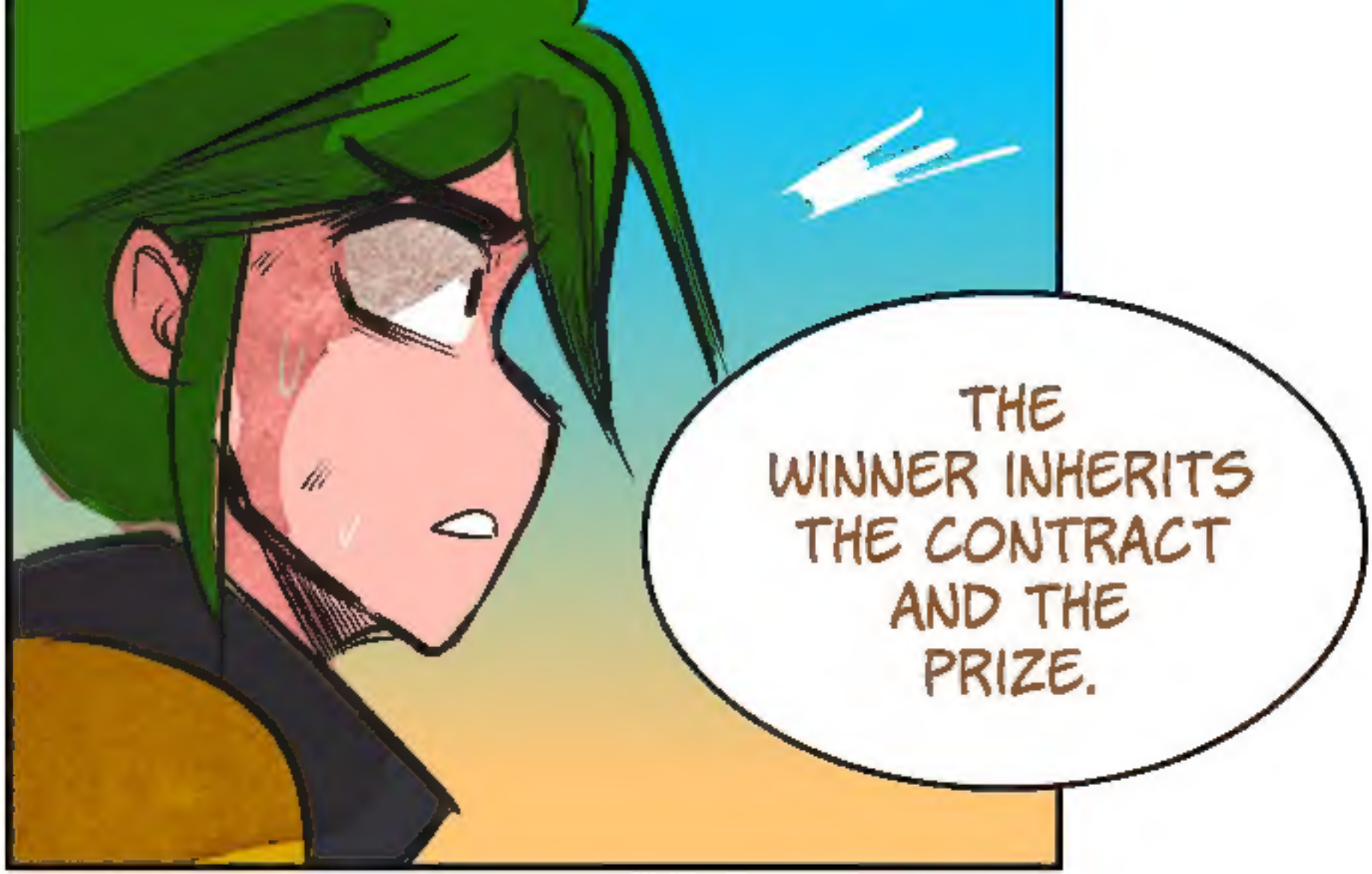
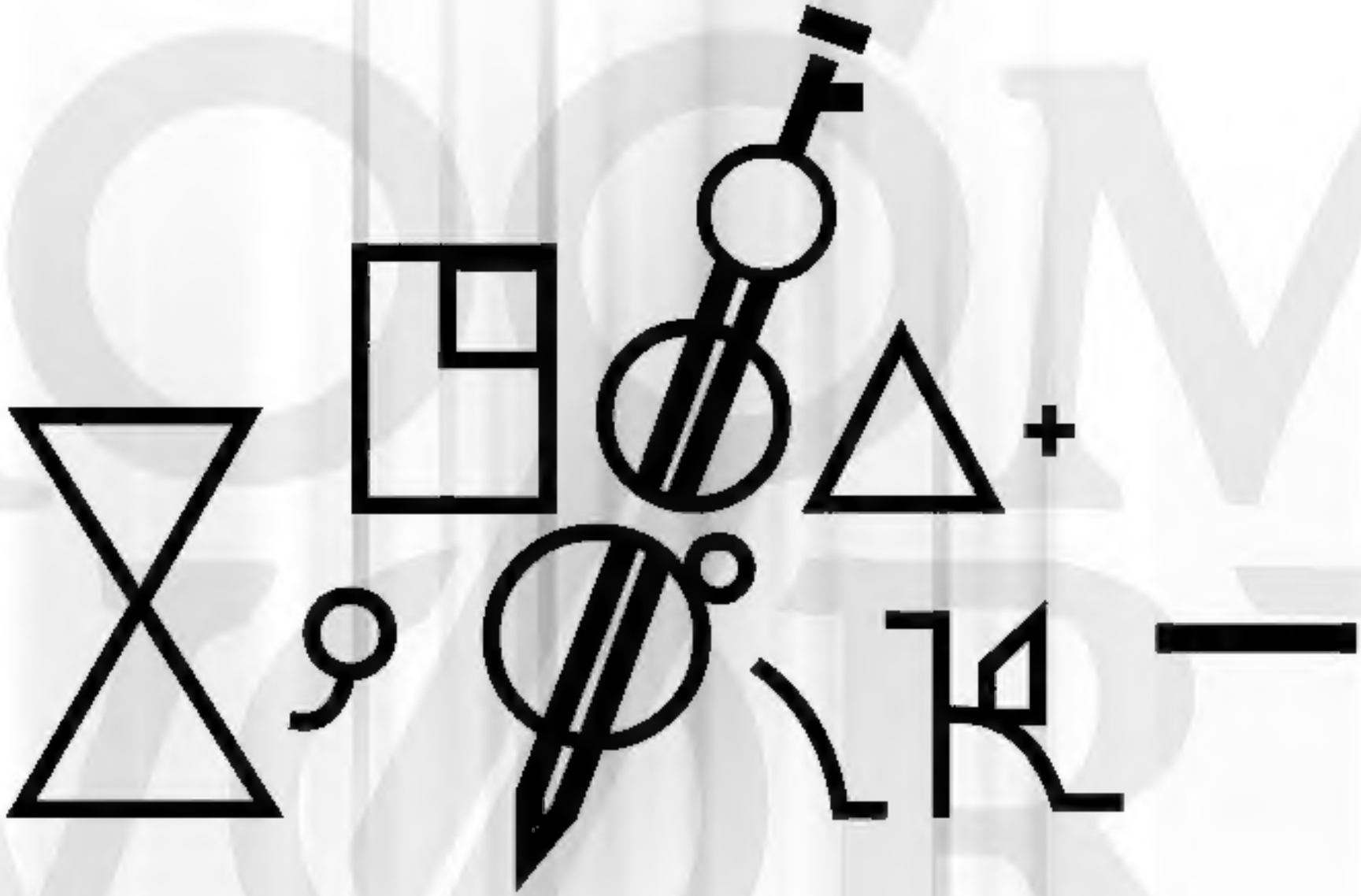
IT'S A COMPETITIVE CONTRACT BETWEEN TWO PARTIES...

IT JUST SAYS "THE SHADOW" ... AND "DON SANTIAGO".


THE WINNER INHERITS THE CONTRACT AND THE PRIZE.

YOUNG MAN, YOU ARE THE PRIZE.



STORY/ART: TOONIMATED

CHAPTER 102

" MARIONETTE "

!!!
IS THIS YOUR IDEA OF A JOKE?!

I ASSURE YOU IT IS NOT.

I ENJOY JOKING ABOUT MANY THINGS, BUT I TAKE CONTRACTS *VERY* SERIOUSLY!

I'M SORRY, BUT...

THERE'S NO WAY WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS TRUE.

I CAN'T EXPLAIN HOW YOU KNOW ABOUT DON, BUT...

HE'S MY CLOSEST CONFIDANTE.

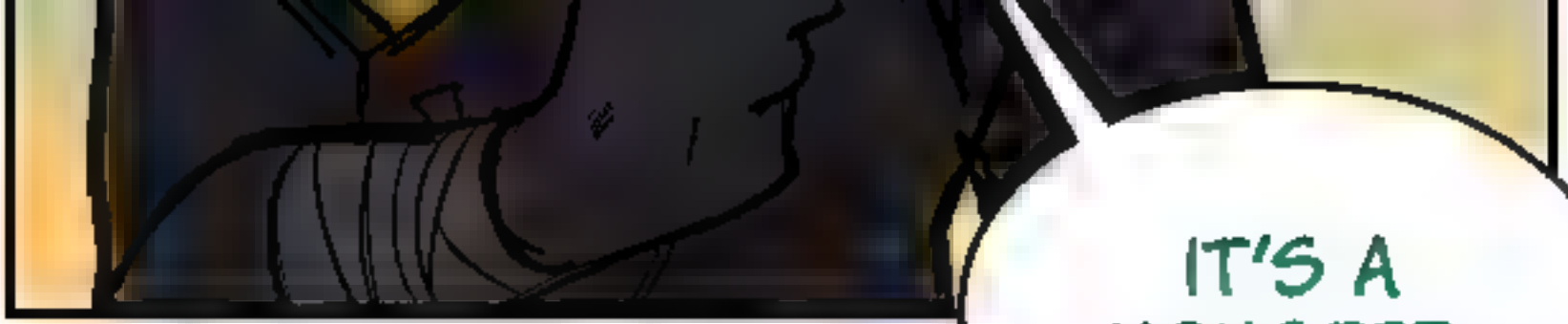
THERE'S NO WAY HE'D BE INVOLVED WITH THE SHADOW AND NOT TELL ME.
MAYBE HE DOESN'T REMEMBER!

THERE COULD BE SOMETHING LIKE ME AND MY BROTHER THAT HE'D DO ANYTHING FOR.

... OR MAYBE HE'S NOT WHO HE SAYS HE IS.

HE COULD
BE USING YOU
TO PULL ONE OVER ON
THAT "THE SHADOW"
PERSON!

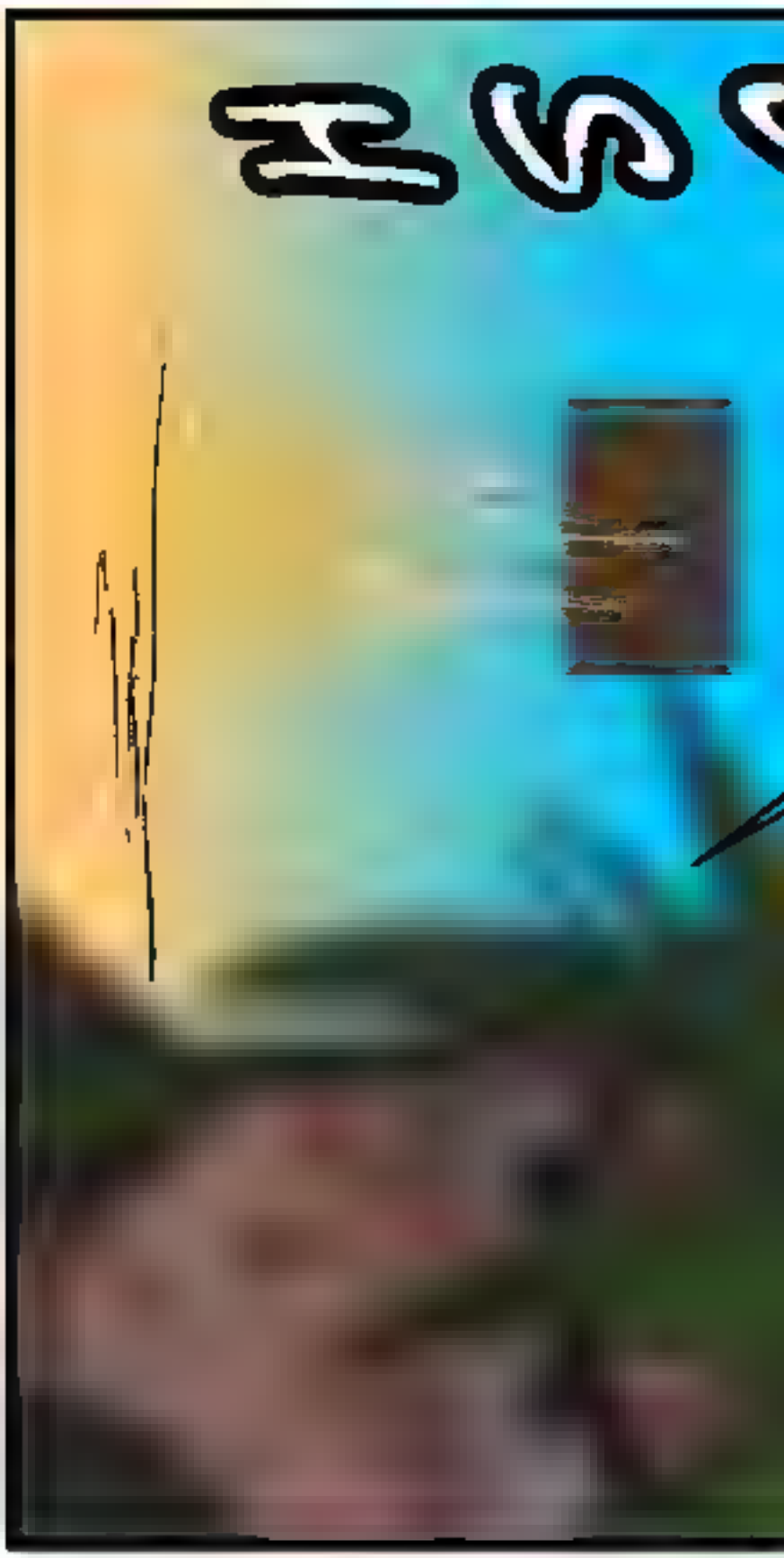
THE SHADOW'S NOT SOME PERSON...
SQUEEZE



IT'S A MONSTER.

AND DON KNOWS THAT BETTER THAN ANYONE.

AHA! WHAT IF THAT'S JUST WHAT HE *WANTS* YOU TO THINK?
WOOO
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE SAYING...

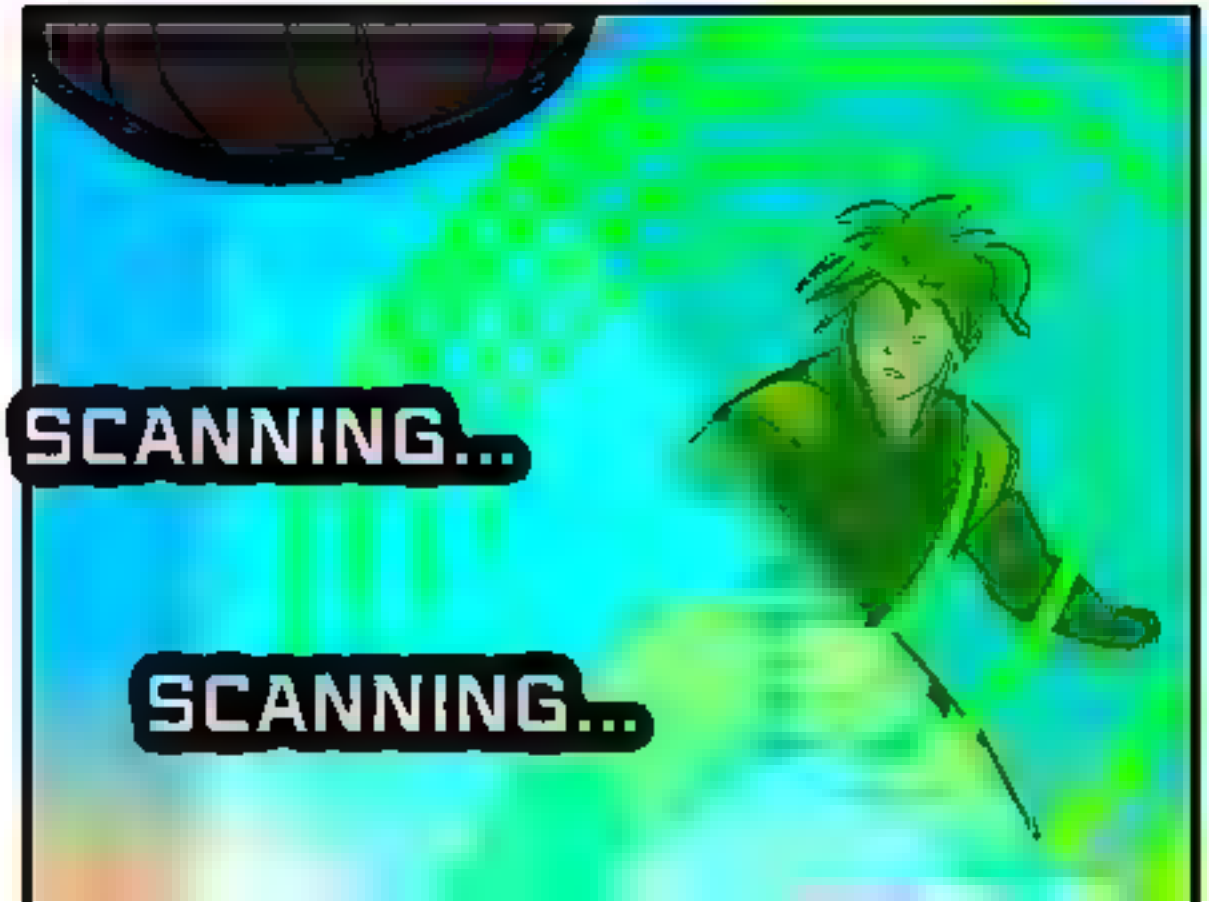


BEHIND YOU!!

Well well
well... looks like we
found the party
poopers!

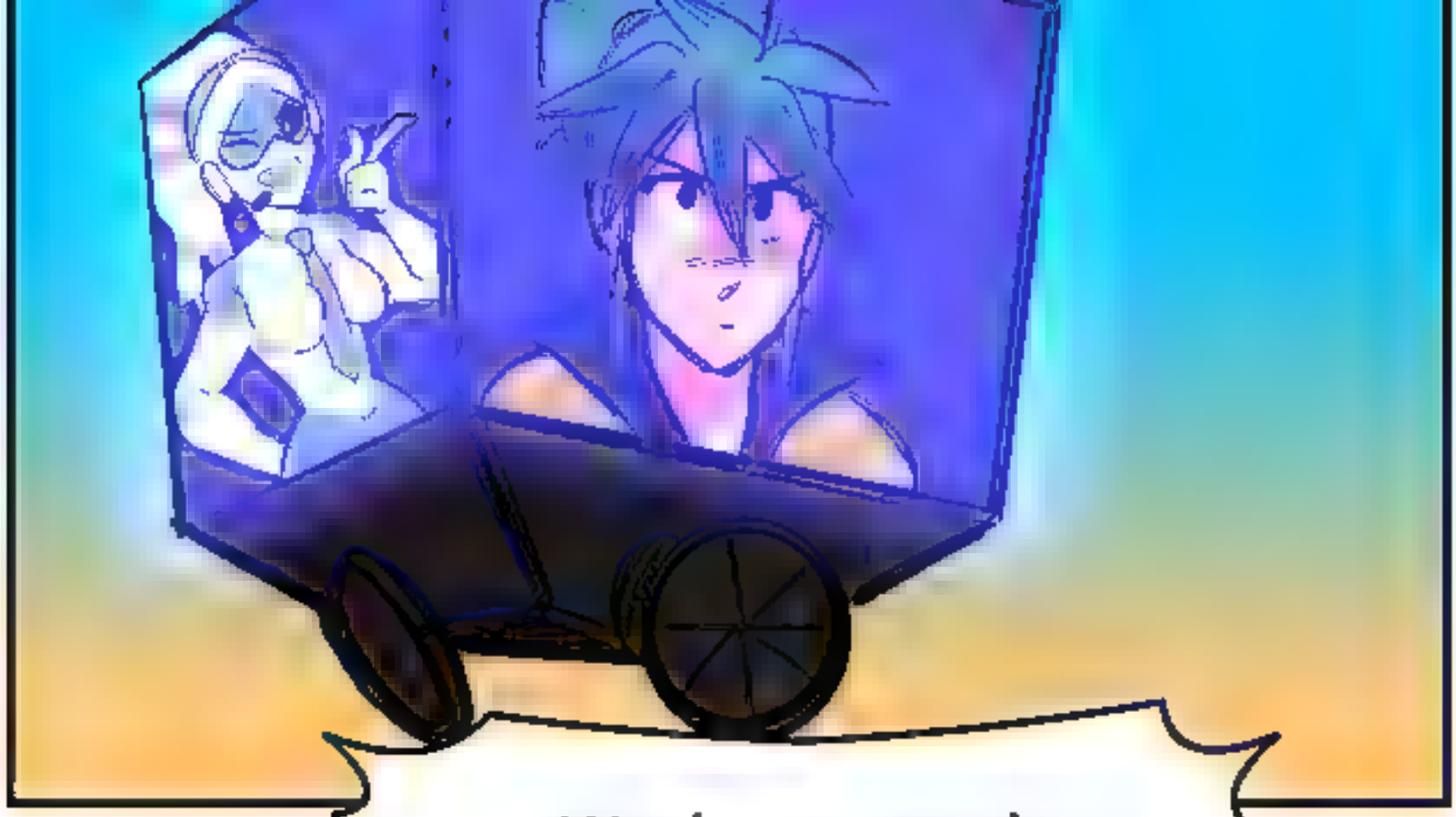
Why don't we see what you're made of?
WHIRR

VRRRP
GET BACK!


SCANNING...
SCANNING...

HUH?
IT'S JUST A
SCANNER...

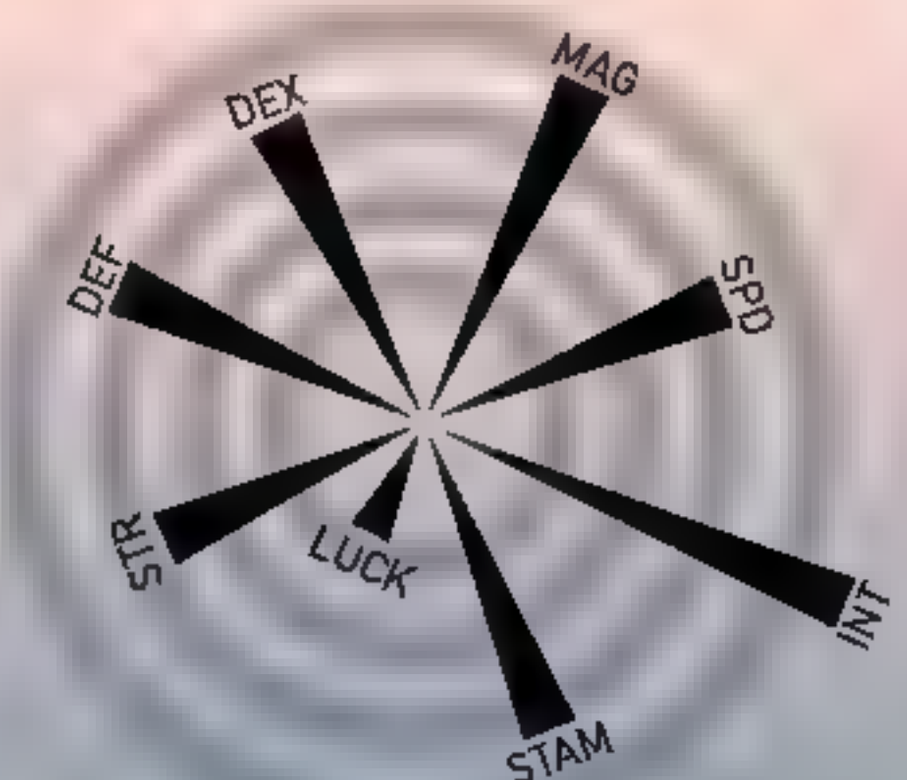
Don't worry!
our scanner is
near-painless!



We just use it to figure out the best way to hurt you!

Wowzers, look at that rank!

LEVEL 10



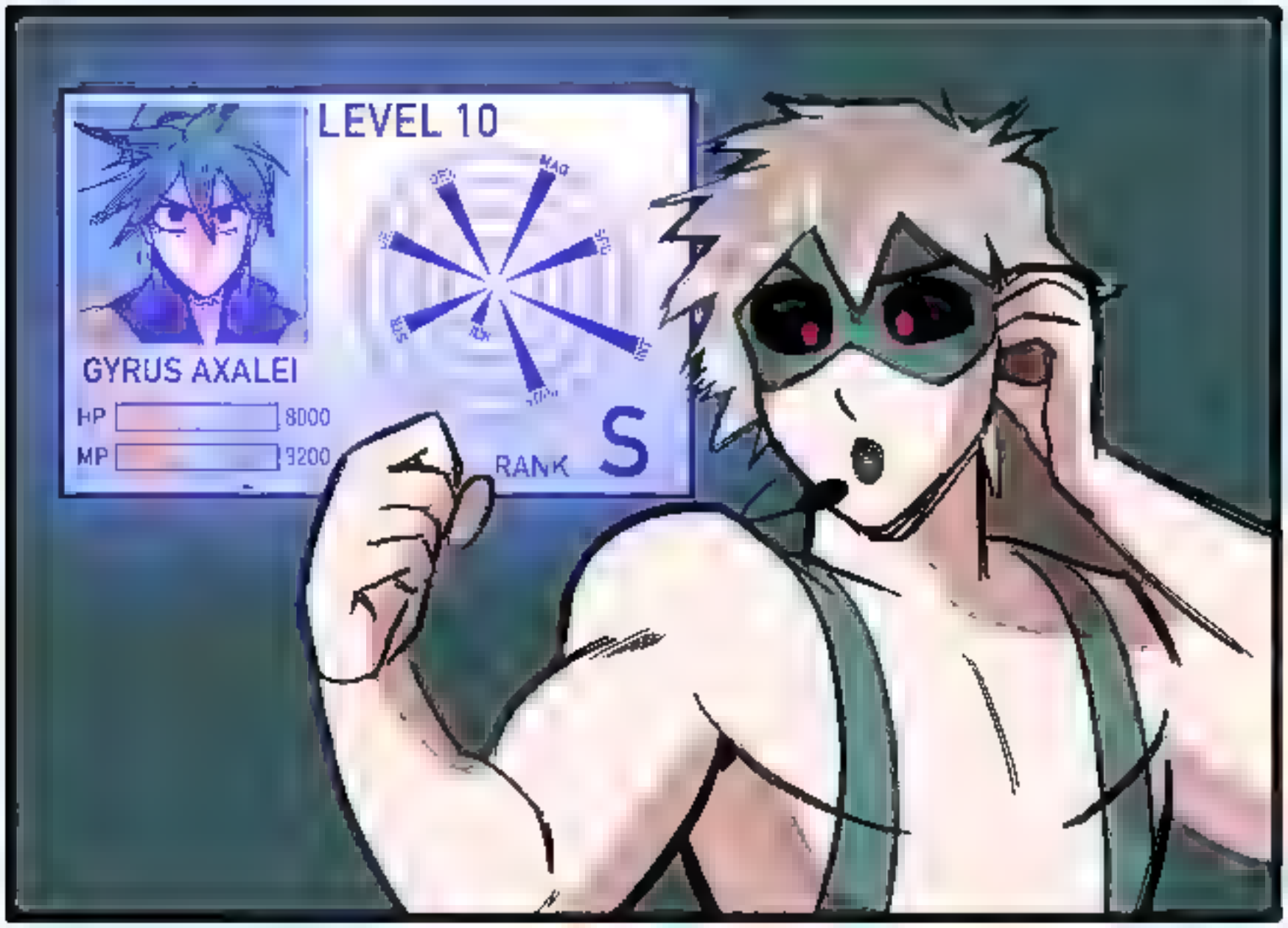
GYRUS AXALEI

HP 8000

S

But what's with that luck stat? Did he contract a virus?!

Over to
you, KNOX!


LEVEL 10
GYRUS AXALEI
HP
8000
MP
3200
RANK
S

Thanks, LOPY.
Despite the bad luck,
this is one of the highest
ranked contestants we've
had on the show!

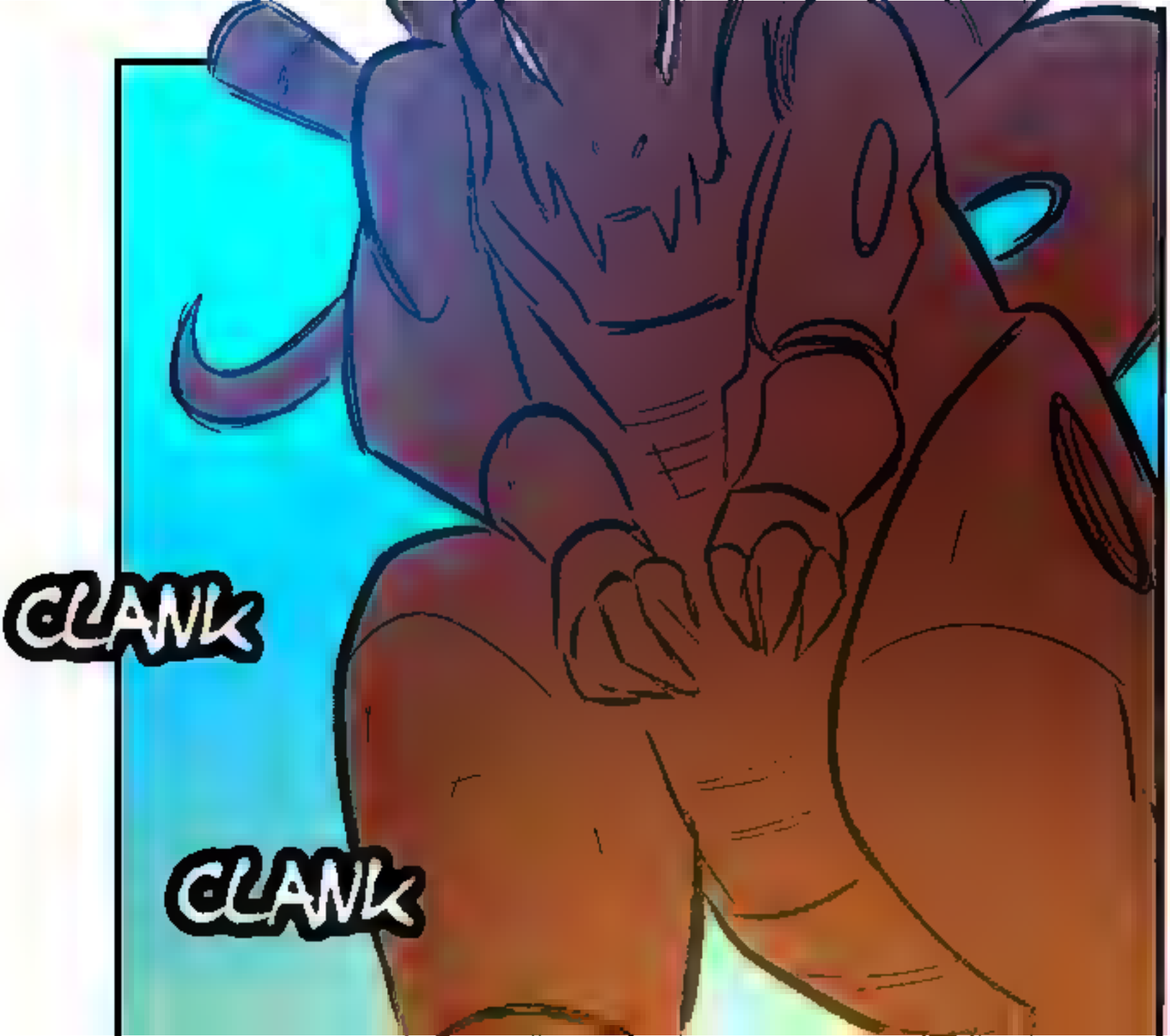
But be careful not
to go too easy on him,
he has something
up his sleeve.

I'm getting readings of a peripheral device located on the subject's wrist that is diverting 31.2% of his energy to create a firewall around another power reserve of unknown quantity!

Knox, what would we do without you?! Dangerously underestimate our contestants is the answer!

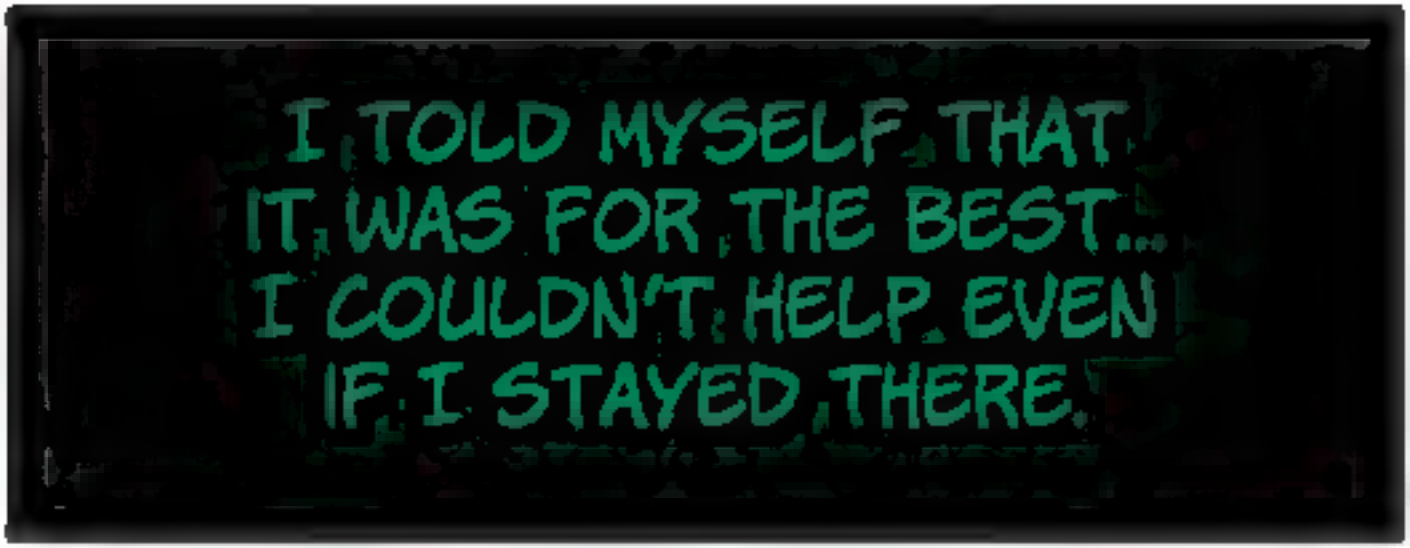
STOMP

Well then,
I think THIS boss
should provide a
sufficient challenge!

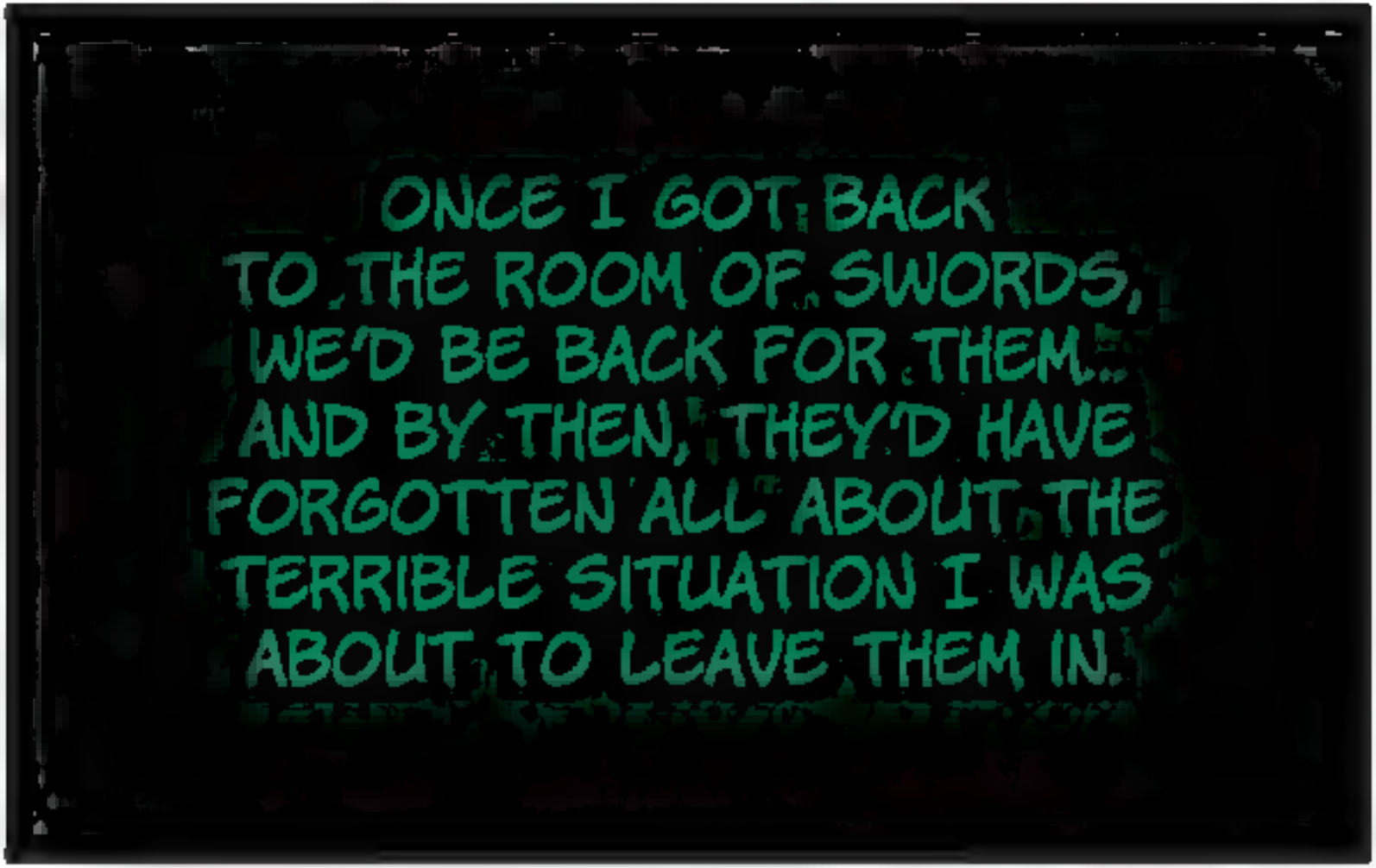

CLANK
CLANK

THE ANDROID IS RIGHT, THE IMPLANT IS STILL DRAINING A LOT OF MY POWER...

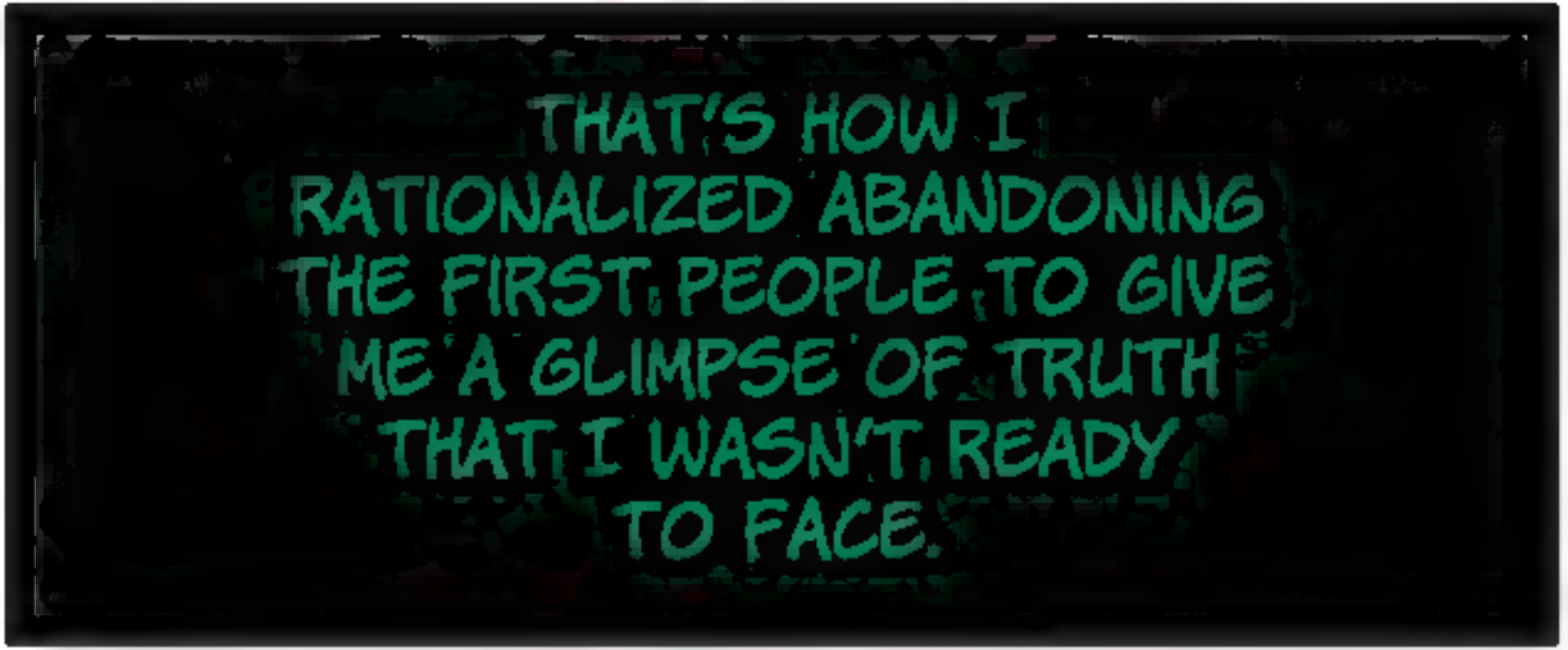
THERE'S NO WAY I CAN DEAL WITH THIS ON MY OWN.

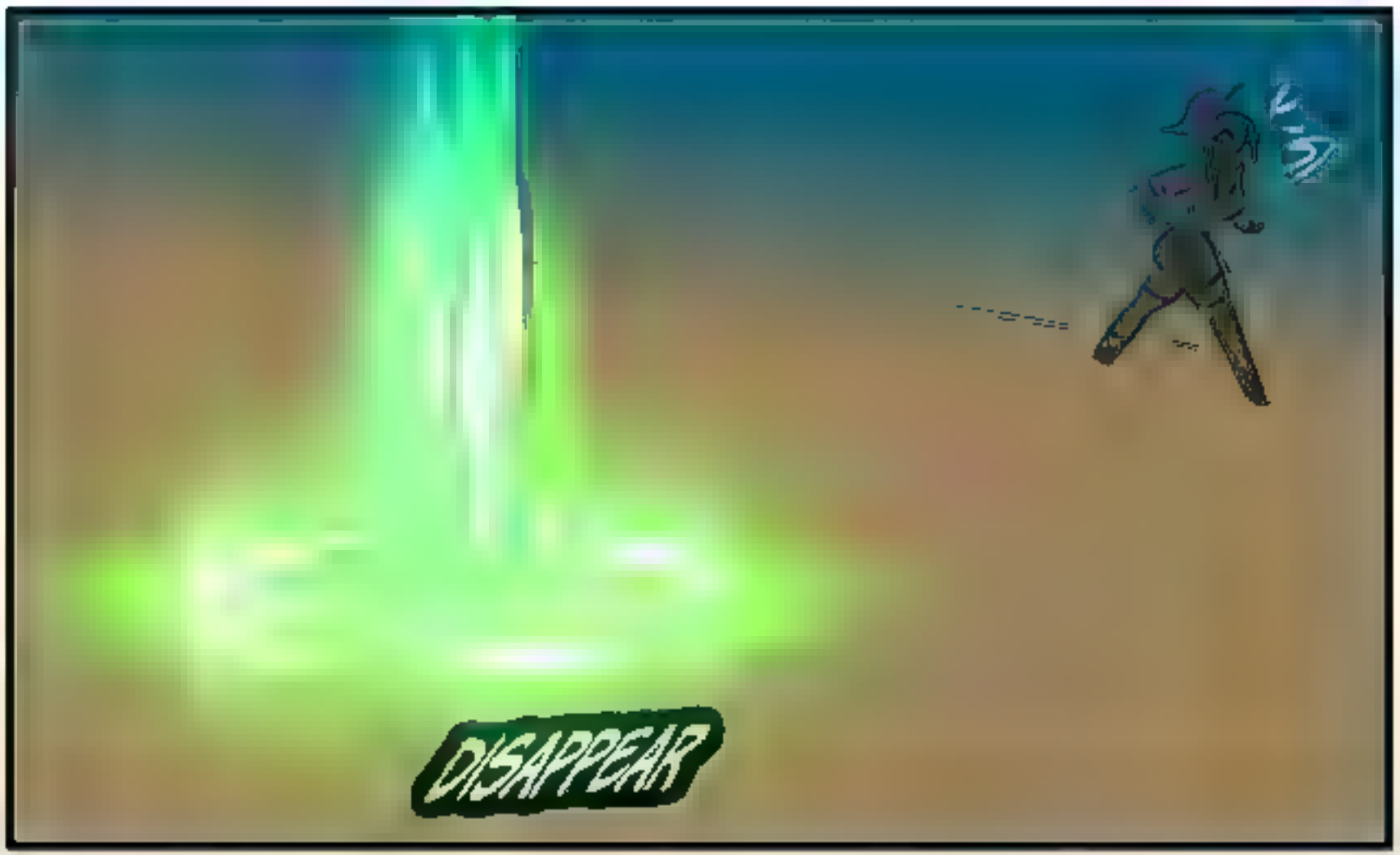

I TOLD MYSELF THAT
IT WAS FOR THE BEST...
I COULDN'T HELP EVEN
IF I STAYED THERE.

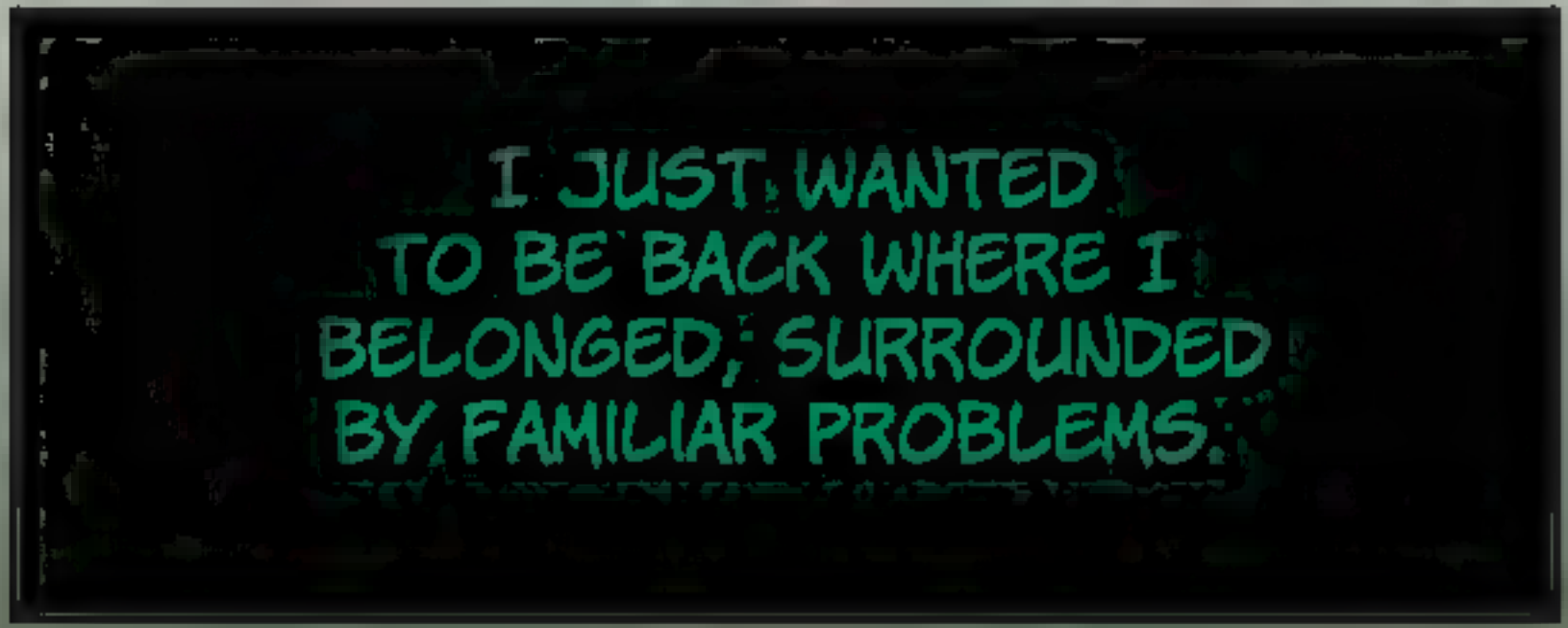
APPEAR


ONCE I GOT BACK TO THE ROOM OF SWORDS, WE'D BE BACK FOR THEM... AND BY THEN, THEY'D HAVE FORGOTTEN ALL ABOUT THE TERRIBLE SITUATION I WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE THEM IN.

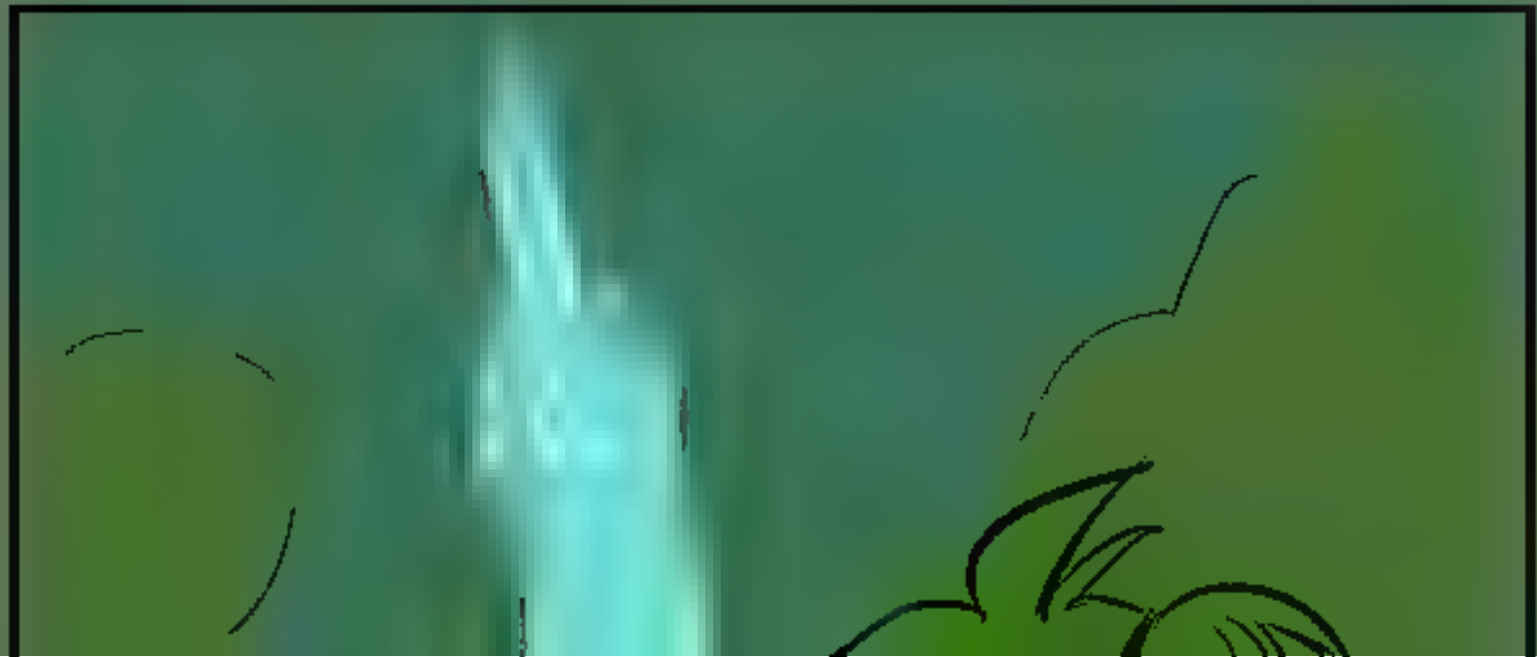
GYRUS?!


THAT'S HOW I RATIONALIZED ABANDONING THE FIRST PEOPLE TO GIVE ME A GLIMPSE OF TRUTH THAT I WASN'T READY TO FACE.


DISAPPEAR


I JUST WANTED
TO BE BACK WHERE I
BELONGED, SURROUNDED
BY FAMILIAR PROBLEMS.

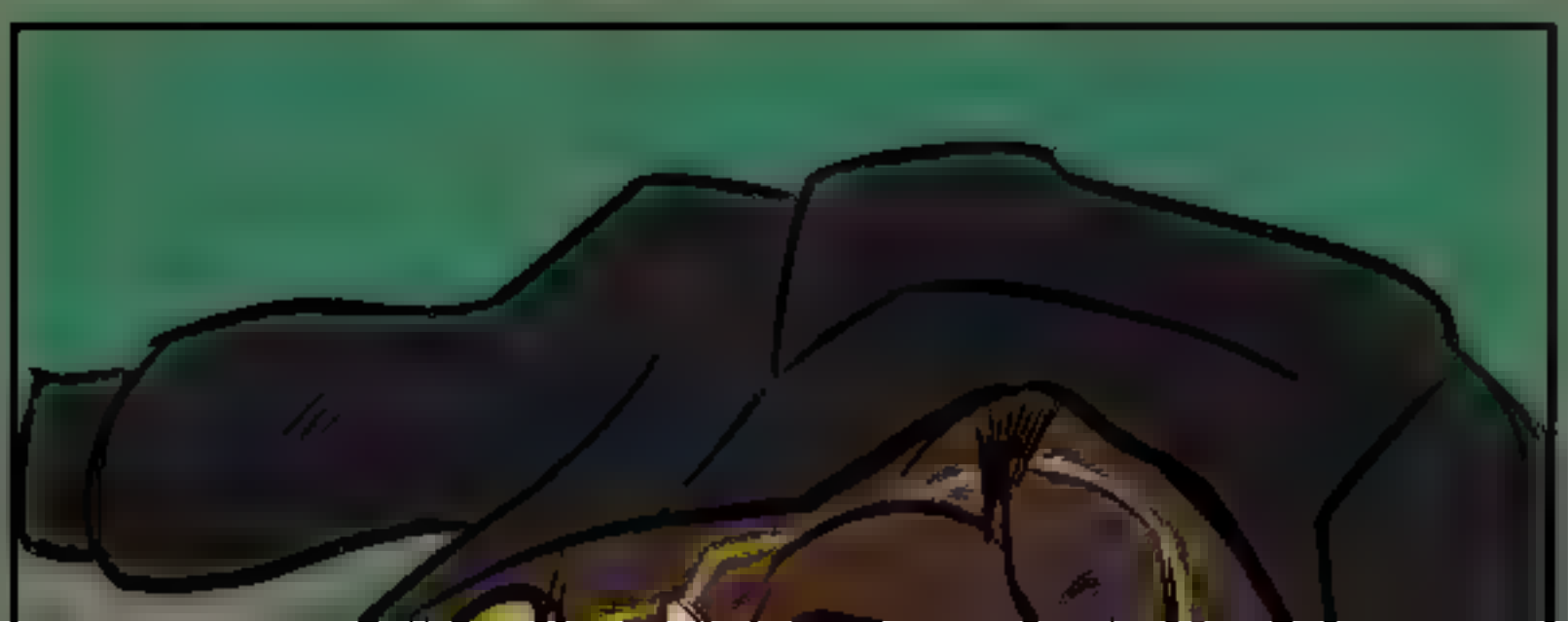
I WANDERED FROM REALM TO REALM, PASSING THROUGH THE BLACK BOX. I WAS DRAINED BY THE TIME I FINALLY GOT BACK.



I MADE IT...!

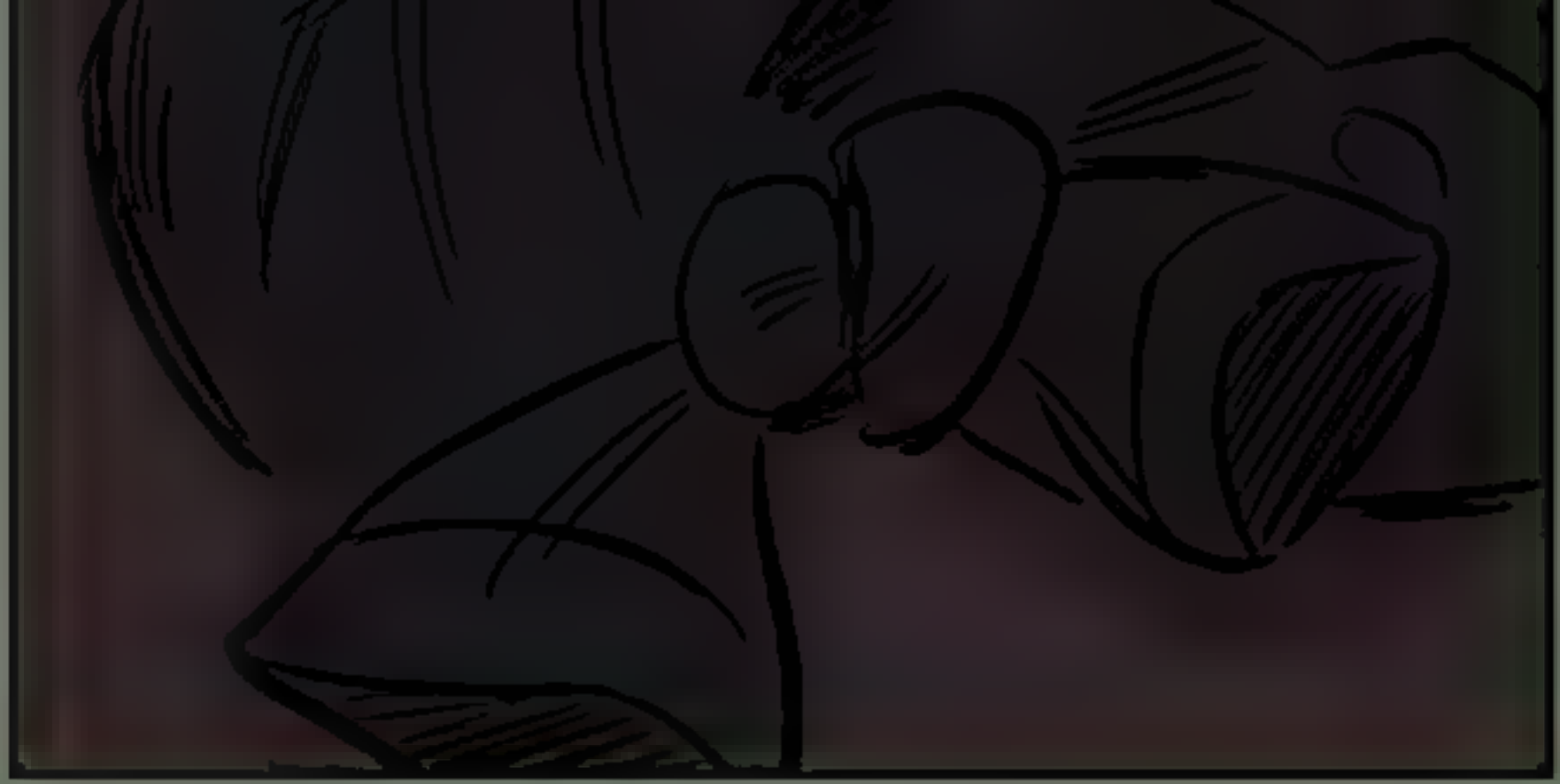
BUT THERE
WAS STILL THE QUESTION
OF WHAT TO DO WITH
THE ARM...

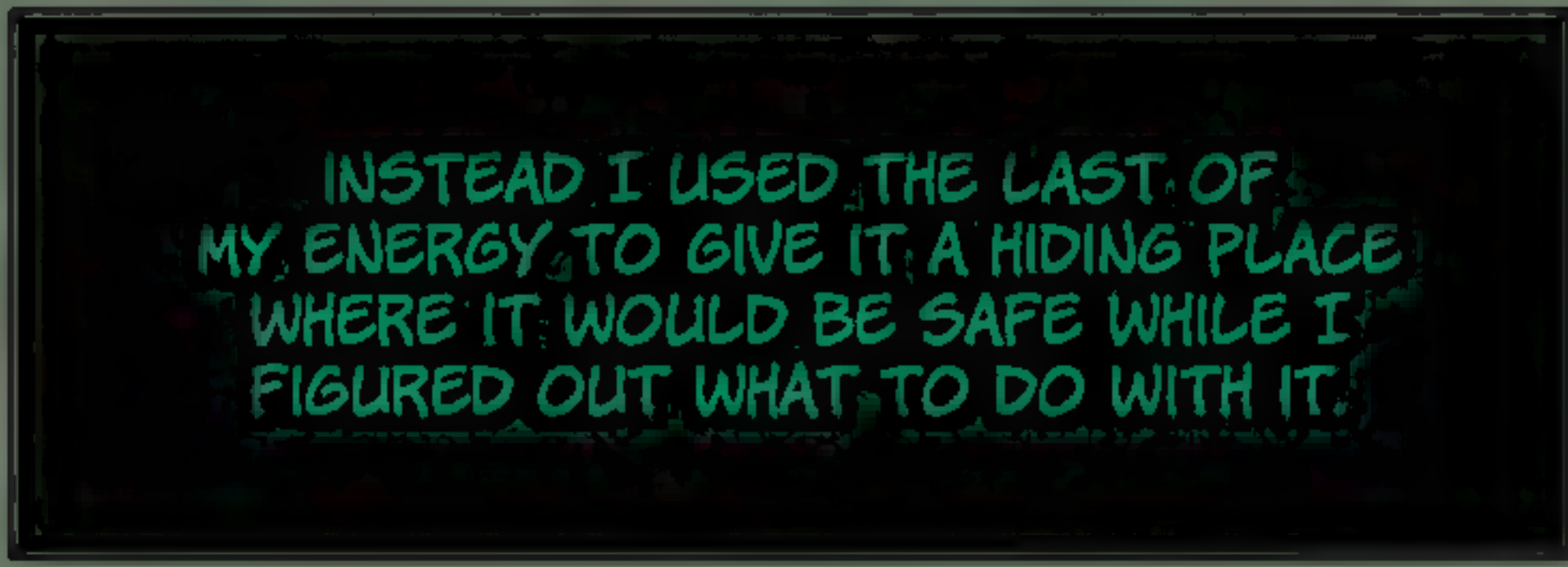
THE TRUTH WAS, IT TERRIFIED ME. NOT BECAUSE OF WHAT IT COULD DO, BUT BECAUSE OF WHAT IT MEANT ABOUT ME AND MY CONNECTION WITH THE SHADOWS.

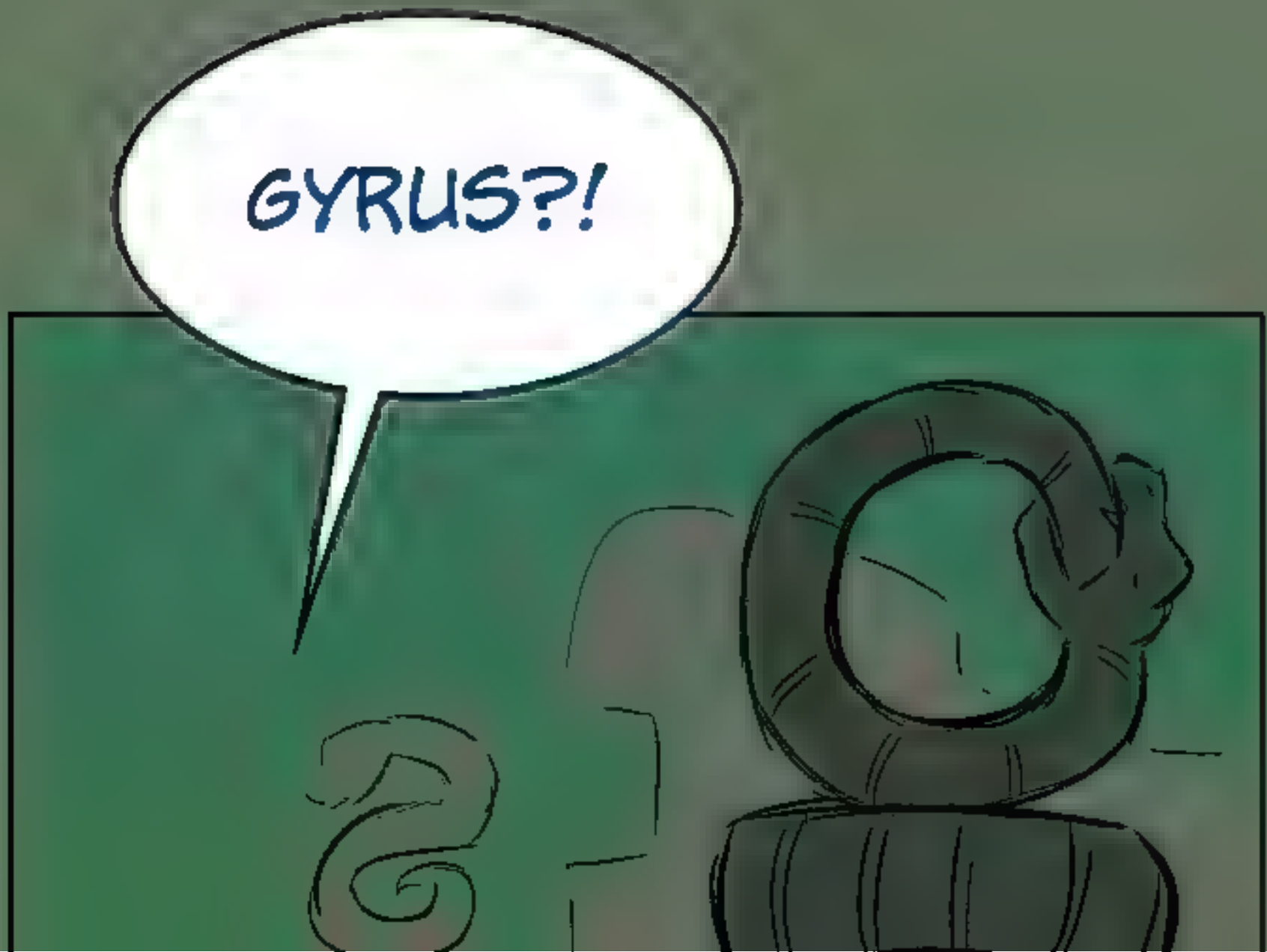


I COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO DESTROY IT... NOR DID I FEEL RIGHT ABOUT BRINGING IT BACK TO THE ROOM OF SWORDS...

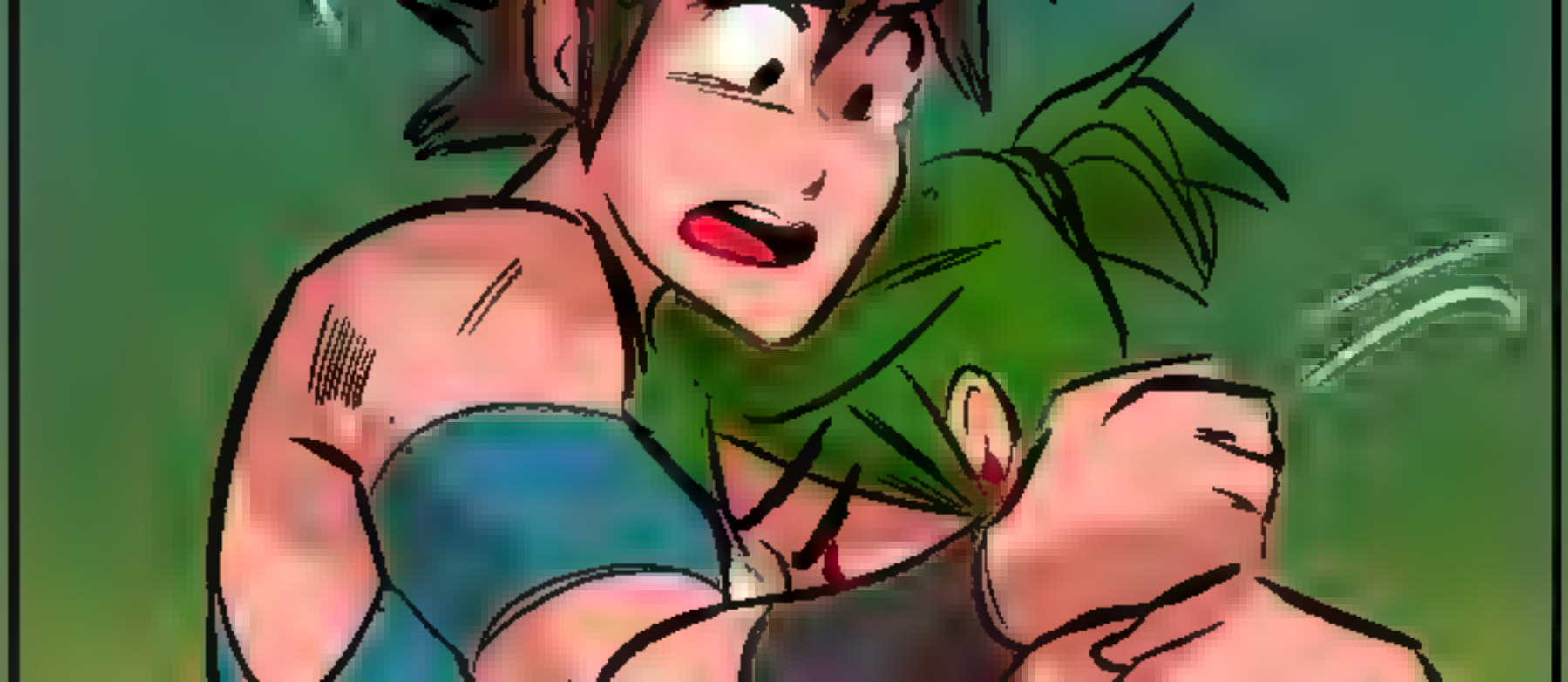
DZZZOMF!

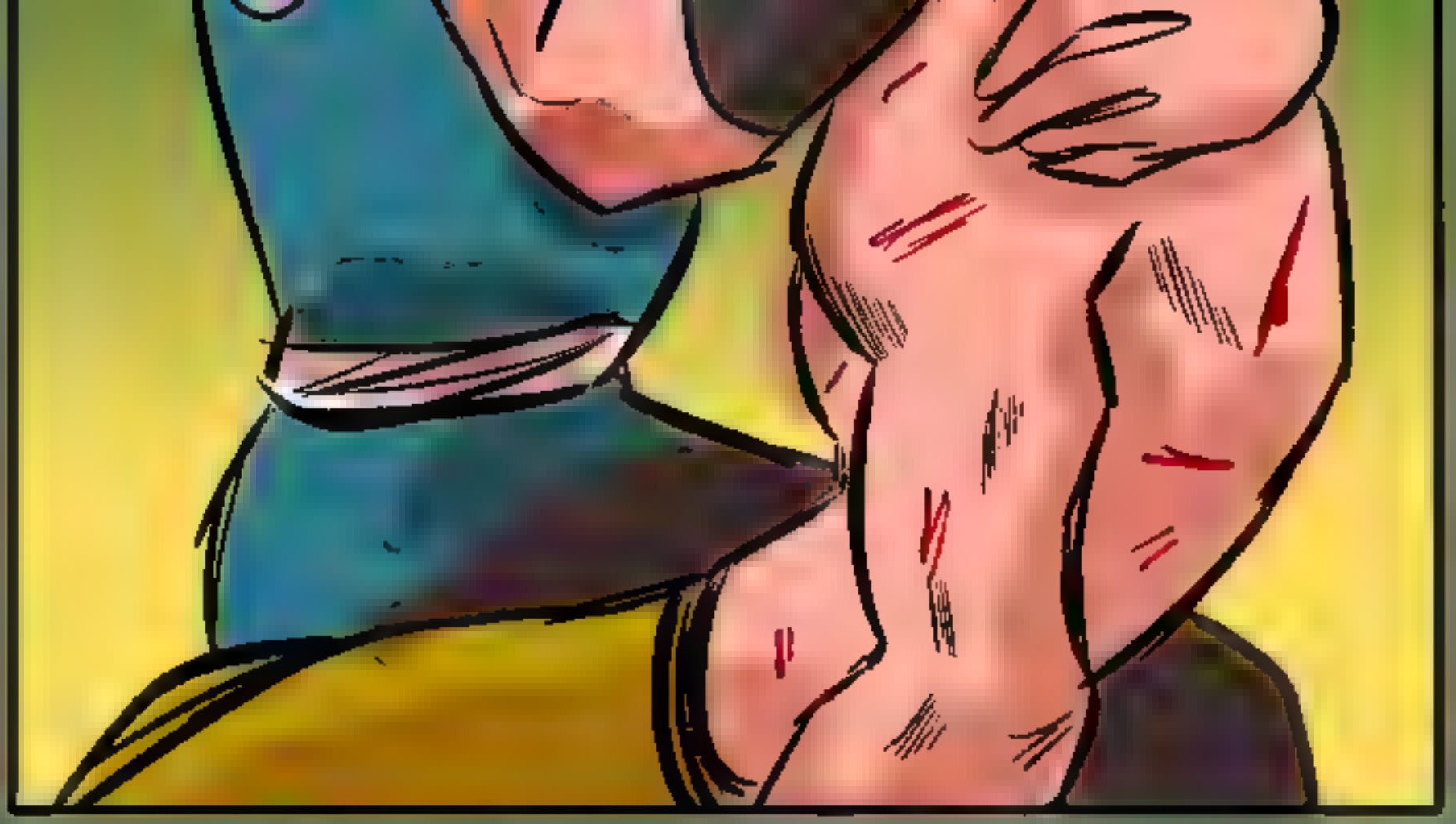



INSTEAD I USED THE LAST OF
MY ENERGY TO GIVE IT A HIDING PLACE
WHERE IT WOULD BE SAFE WHILE I
FIGURED OUT WHAT TO DO WITH IT.


GYRUS?!

Слава богу, I FOUND YOU!

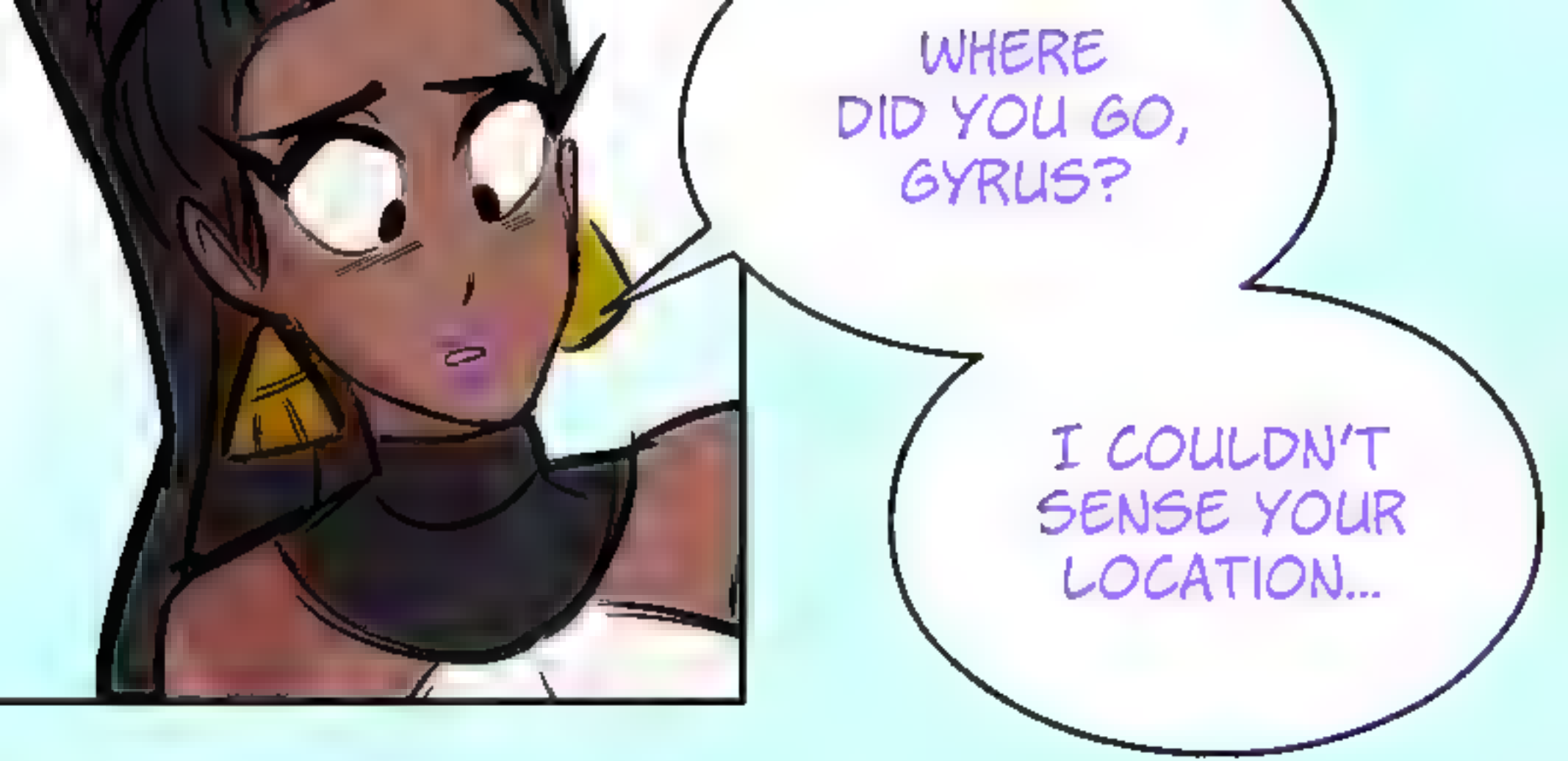




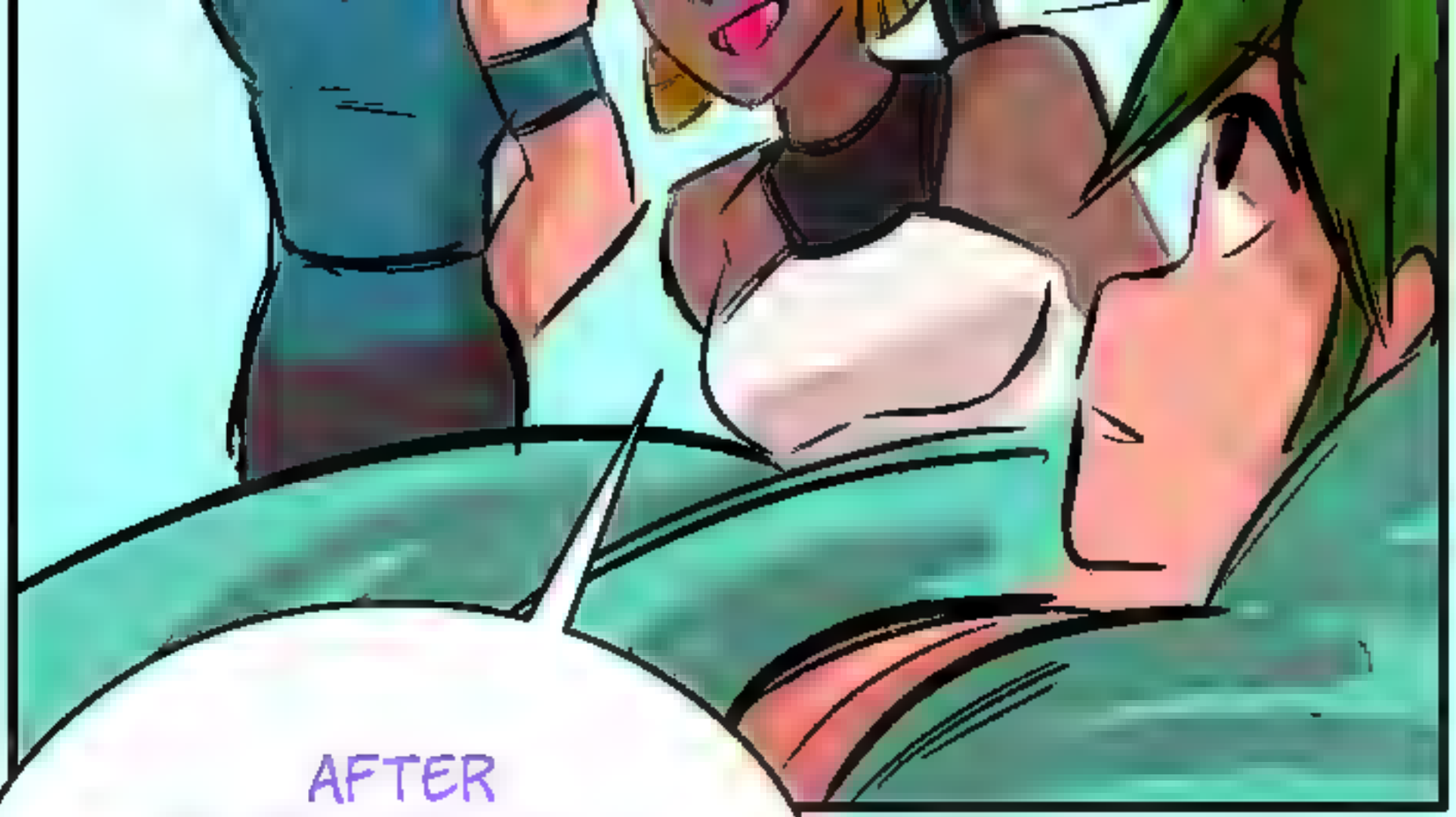
YOU'RE AWAKE!

YOU REALLY GAVE US QUITE A SCARE.

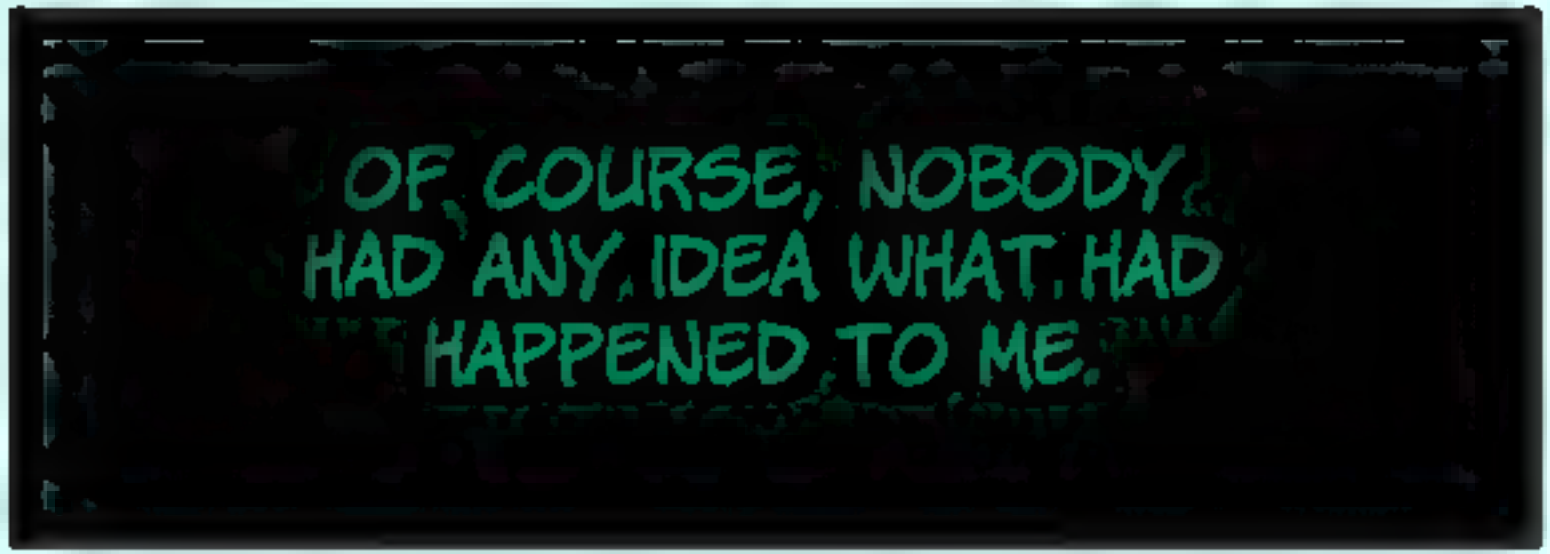
YOU WERE GONE FOR 3 WEEKS!
3 WEEKS? IT FELT LIKE SO MUCH LONGER...

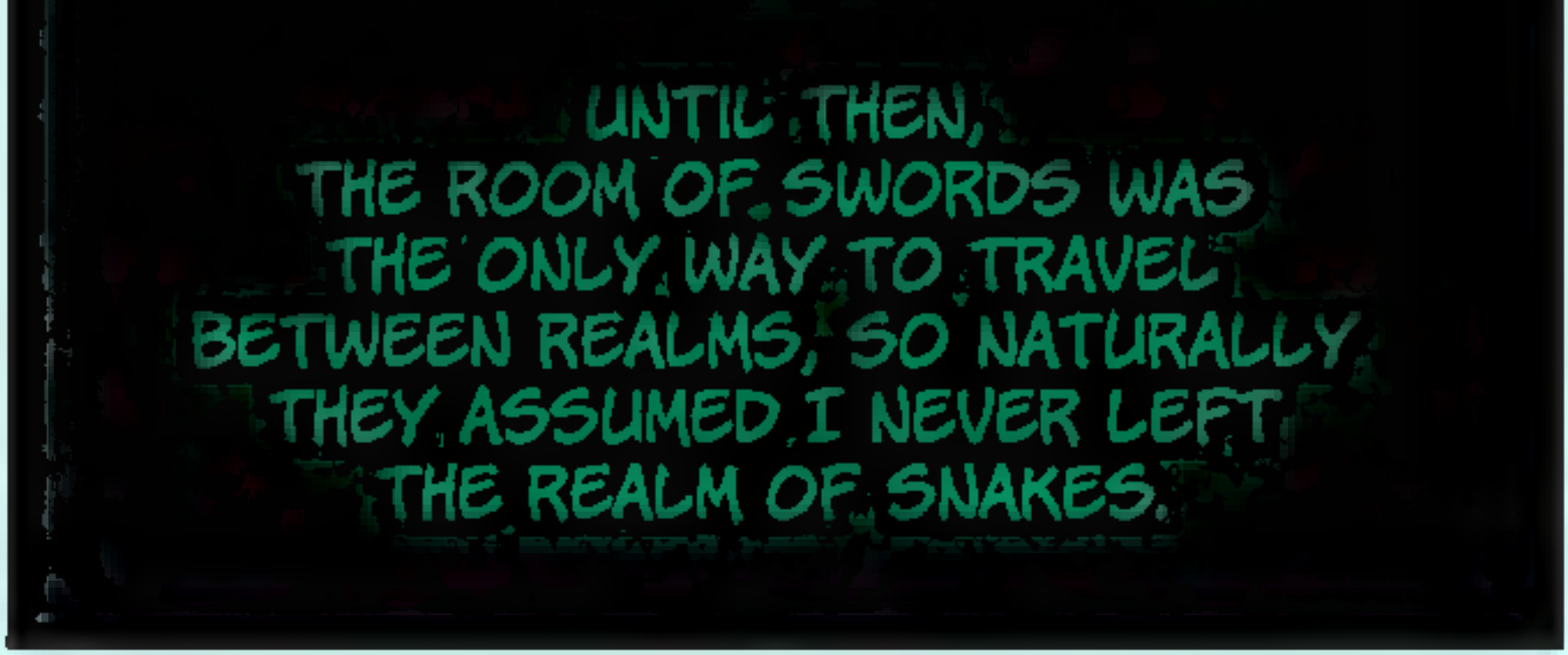

WHERE DID YOU GO, GYRUS?
I COULDN'T SENSE YOUR LOCATION...

TO THINK KODY FOUND YOU NOT FAR FROM WHERE YOU'D DISAPPEARED...



AFTER HE PRACTICALLY TURNED THAT WHOLE REALM INSIDE OUT SEARCHING FOR YOU EVERY DAY.

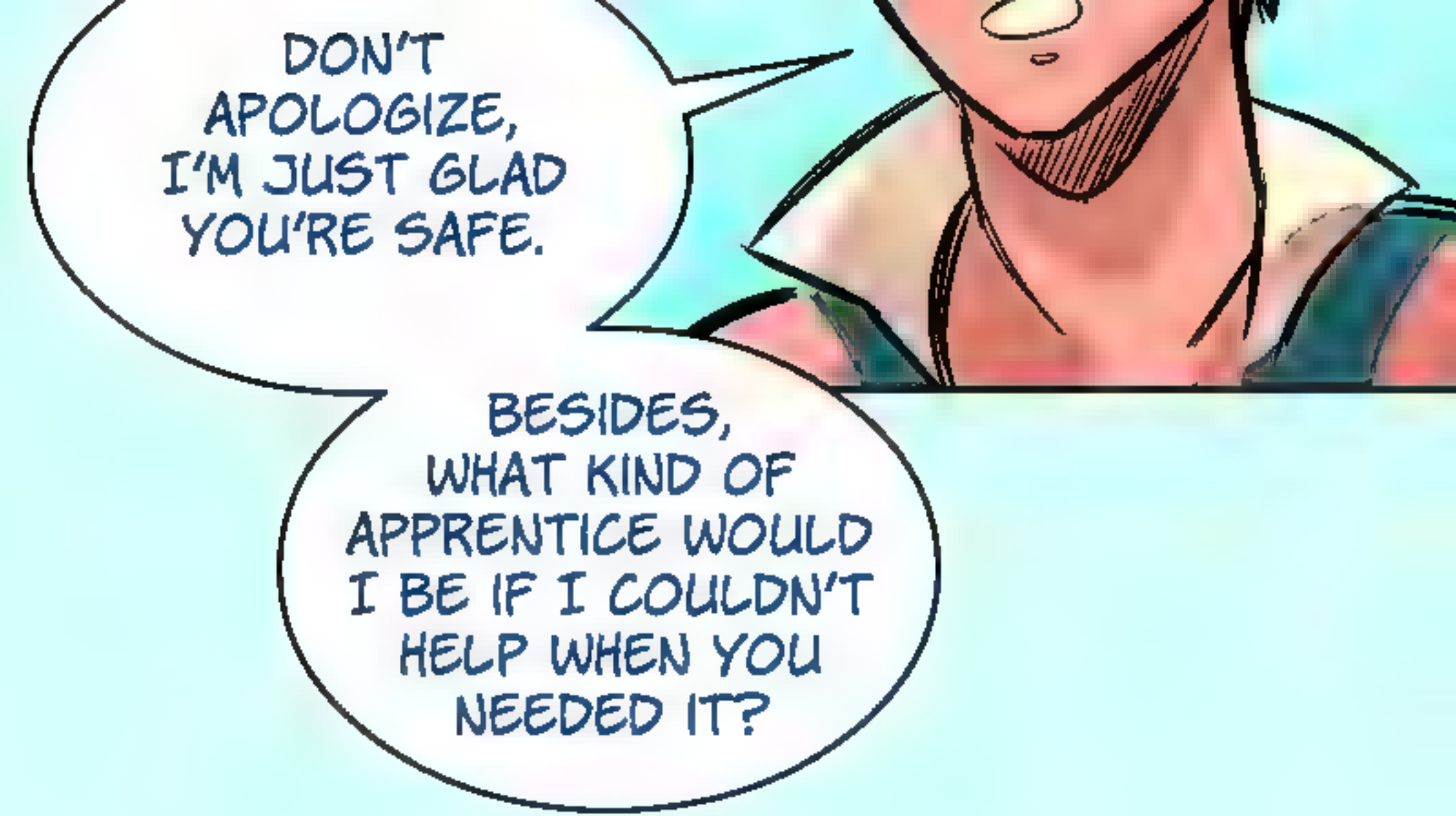

OF COURSE, NOBODY HAD ANY IDEA WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO ME.


UNTIL THEN,
THE ROOM OF SWORDS WAS
THE ONLY WAY TO TRAVEL
BETWEEN REALMS, SO NATURALLY
THEY ASSUMED I NEVER LEFT
THE REALM OF SNAKES.

THANKS FOR NOT GIVING UP ON ME.

I'M SORRY
I'VE BEEN SUCH A
TERRIBLE MENTOR
TO YOU LATELY.

THIS PROBABLY ISN'T WHAT YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE SIGNING UP FOR.

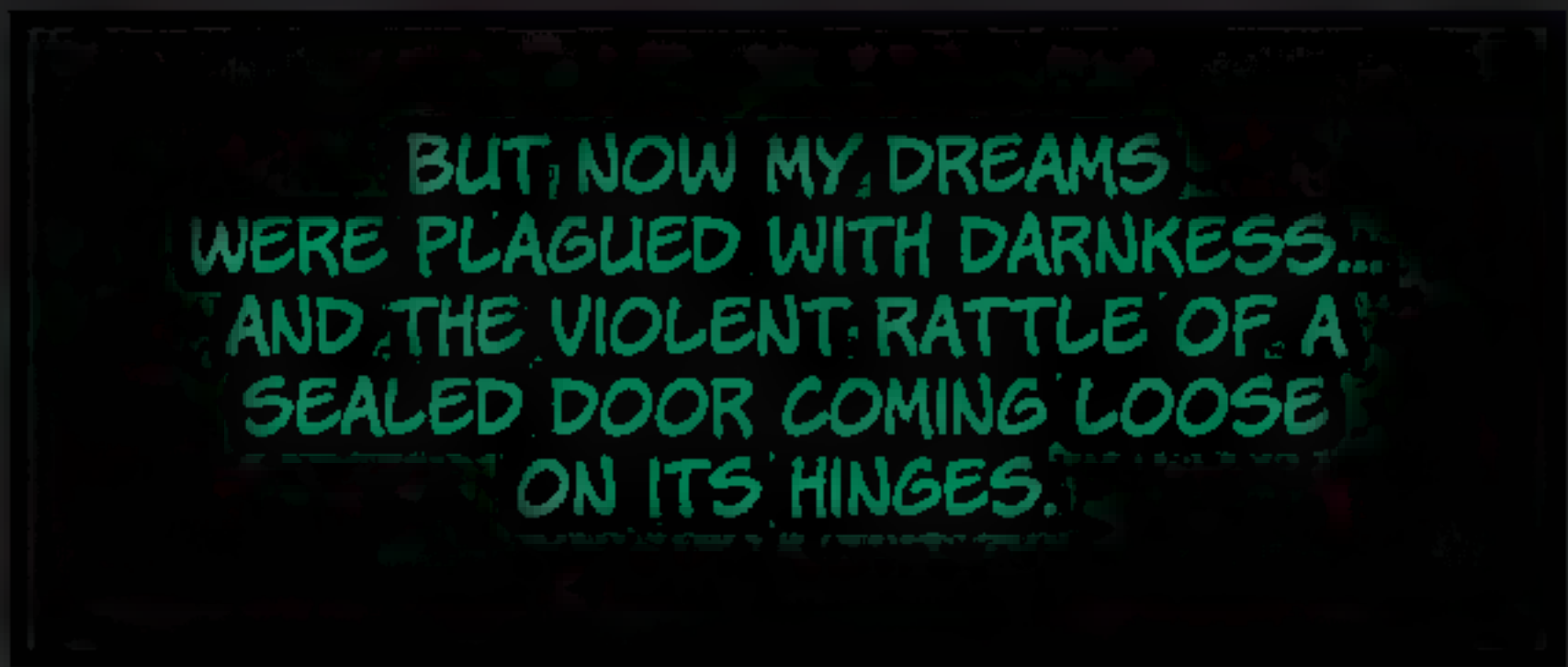

DON'T APOLOGIZE, I'M JUST GLAD YOU'RE SAFE.
BESIDES, WHAT KIND OF APPRENTICE WOULD I BE IF I COULDN'T HELP WHEN YOU NEEDED IT?

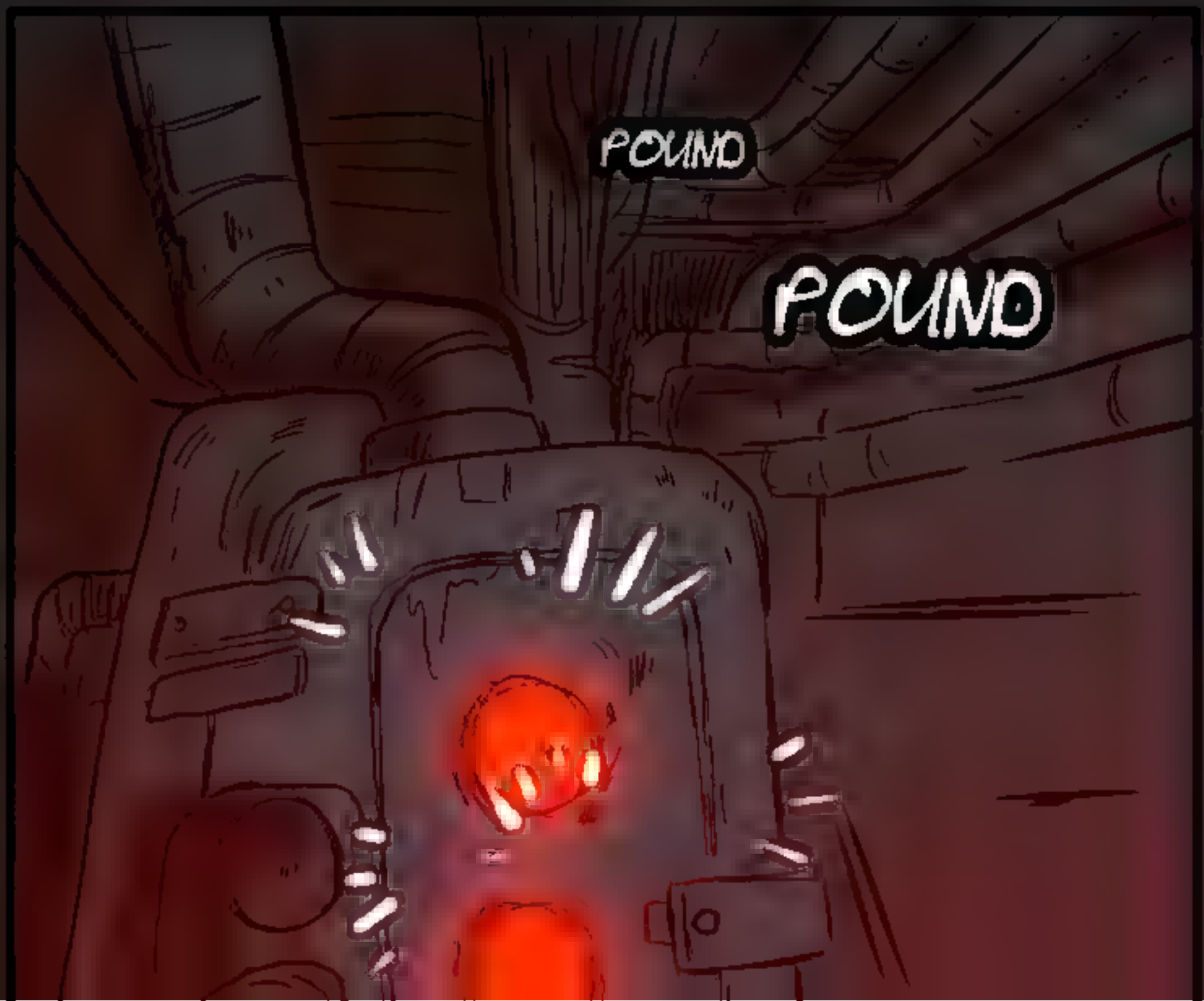
FAIR ENOUGH, BUT I'LL TRY NOT TO MAKE A HABIT OF IT.
I THINK I'VE GIVEN YOU ENOUGH TROUBLE FOR A WHILE.

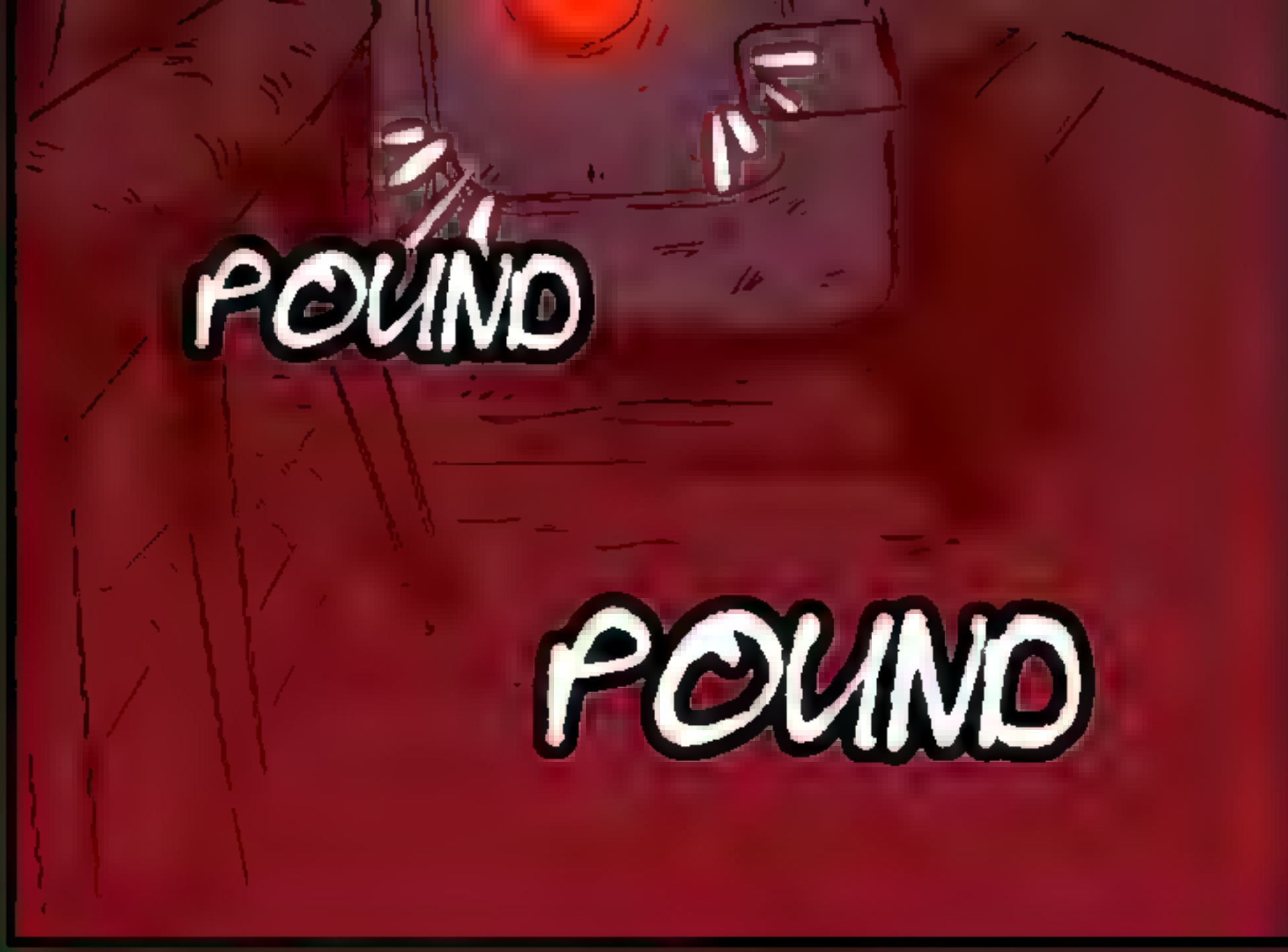
DON'T WORRY, KODY LOVES TROUBLE.
NEPHTHYS

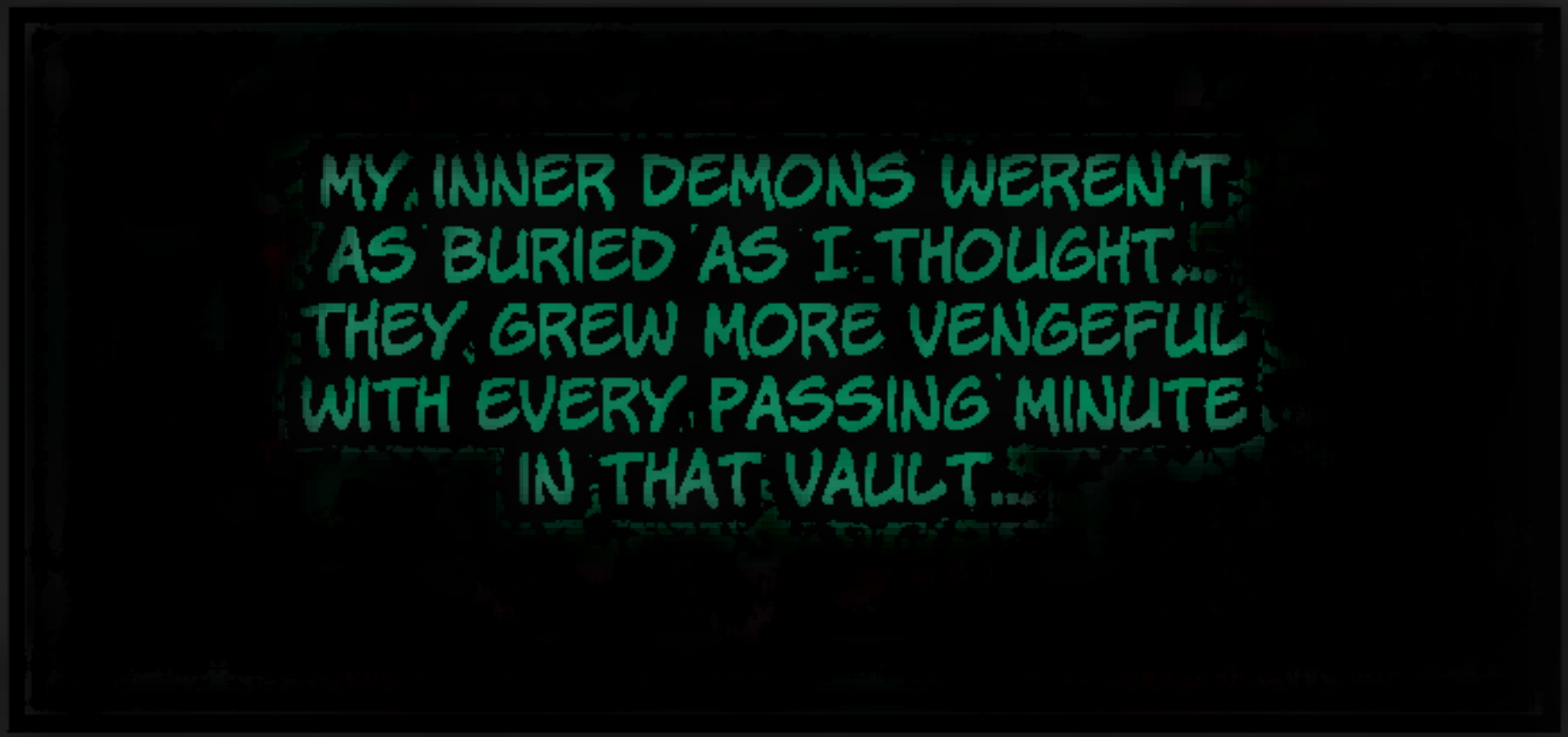
HEEHEE!

THE SHADOW HAD BEEN QUIET IN MY MIND SINCE I LOCKED IT UP IN THE BLACK BOX.

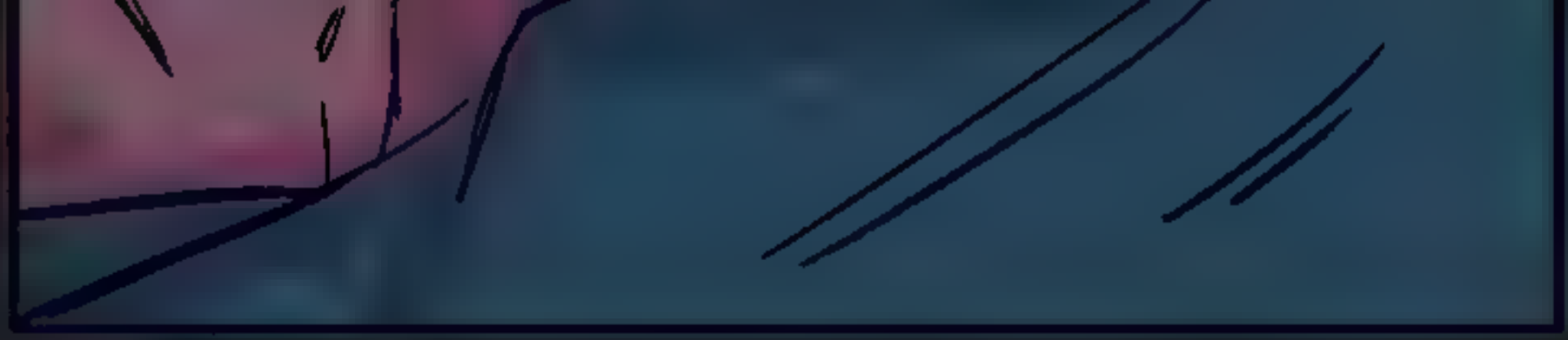

BUT NOW MY DREAMS
WERE PLAGUED WITH DARKNESS...
AND THE VIOLENT RATTLE OF A
SEALED DOOR COMING LOOSE
ON ITS HINGES.


POUND
POUND


POUND
POUND


MY INNER DEMONS WEREN'T AS BURIED AS I THOUGHT... THEY GREW MORE VENGEFUL WITH EVERY PASSING MINUTE IN THAT VAULT...

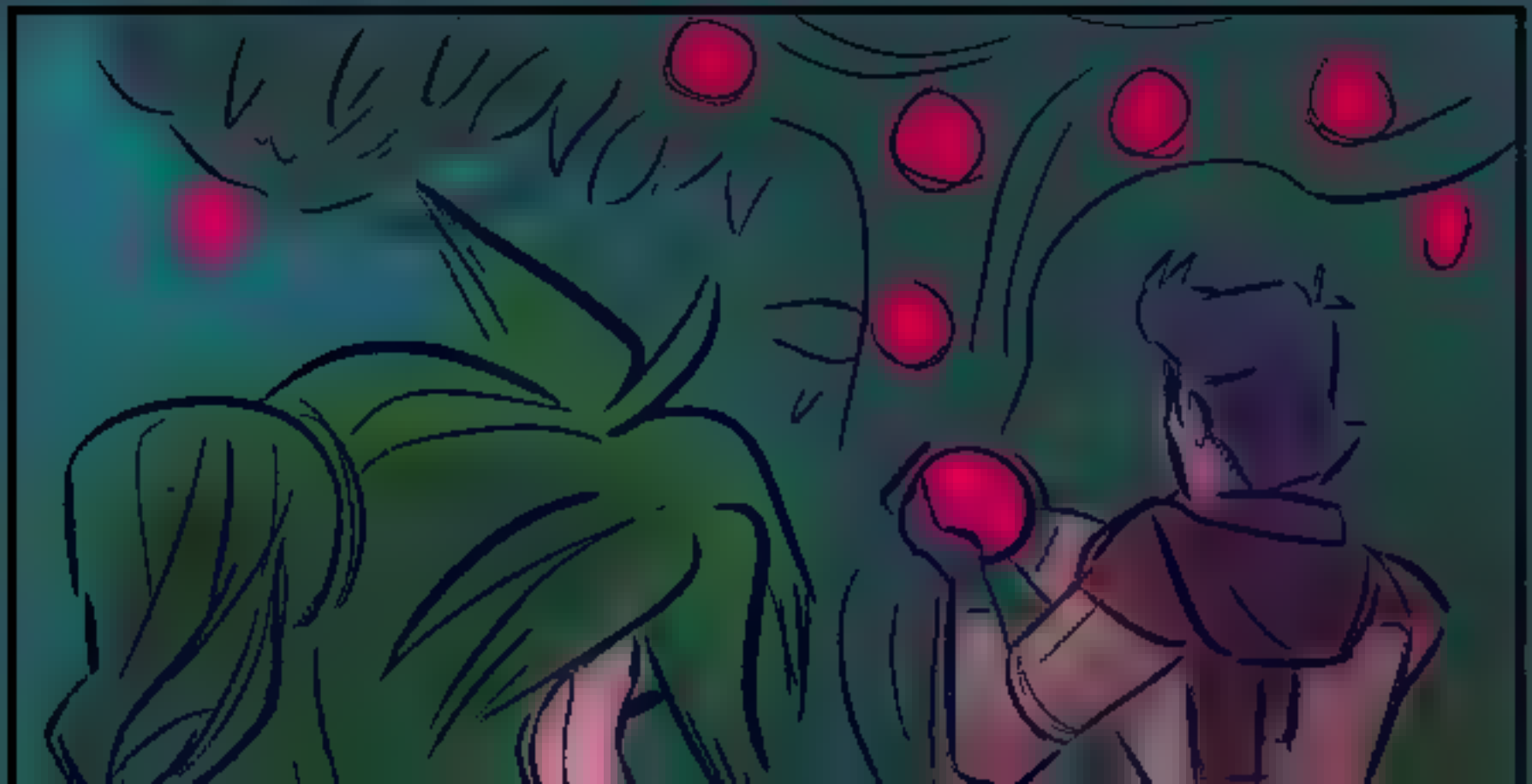
HAH!!



I HAD BEEN AVOIDING THE ONE PERSON WHO I NORMALLY WOULD SHARE THINGS LIKE THIS WITH... BUT I KNEW I COULDN'T KEEP PUTTING IT OFF.

TAK

TAK



SO THIS IS THE TREE THAT GROWS ANY FRUIT YOU CHOOSE...?

AH! SI, THIS IS THE ONE!

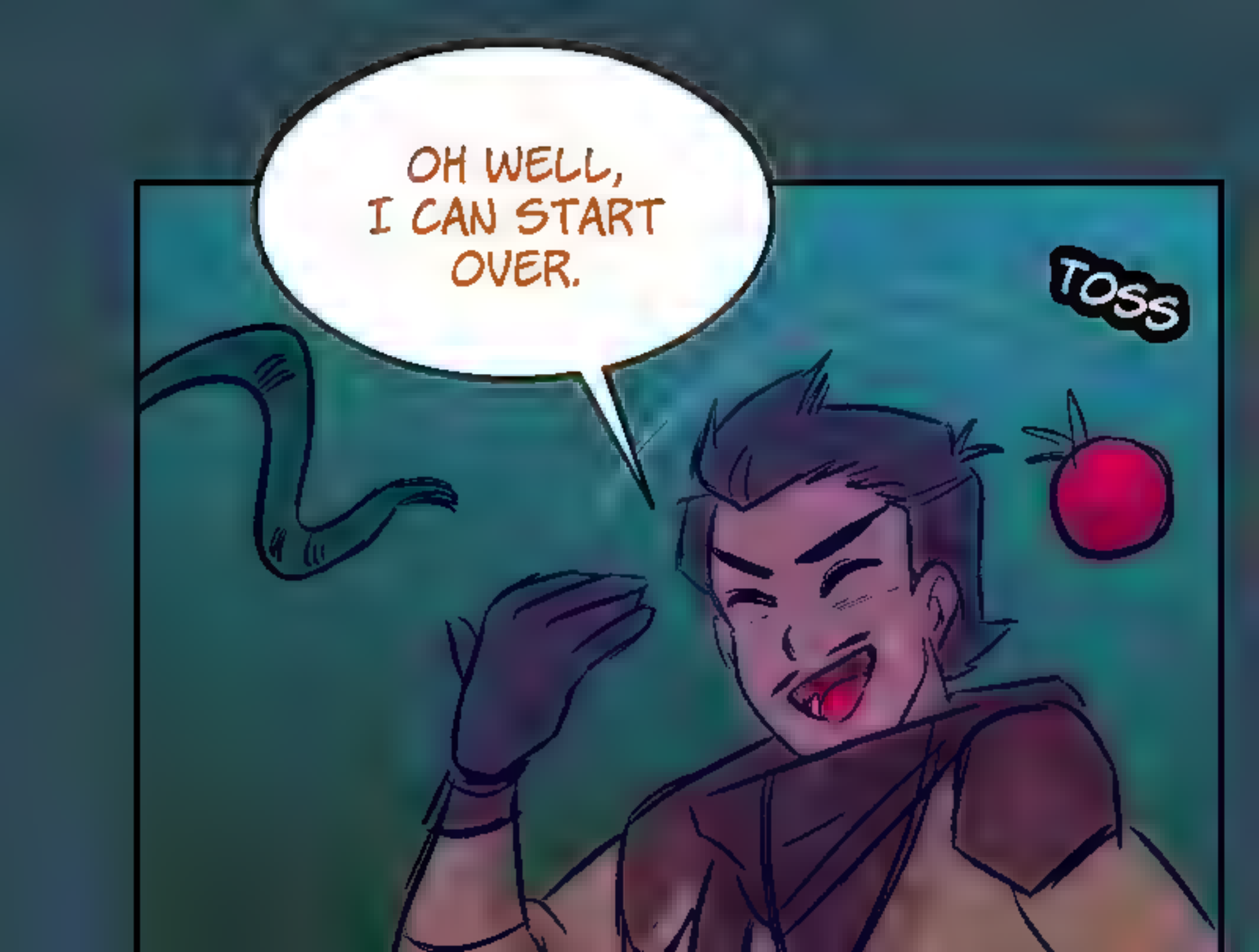
IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU ON YOUR FEET, AMIGO.

IT'S A LOT BIGGER THAN THE LAST TIME I SAW IT.

AH,
BUT I'M AFRAID
IT'S NOT TURNING
OUT AS WELL AS
I'D HOPED...

THE SKIN IS THIN AND QUICK TO SPOIL...

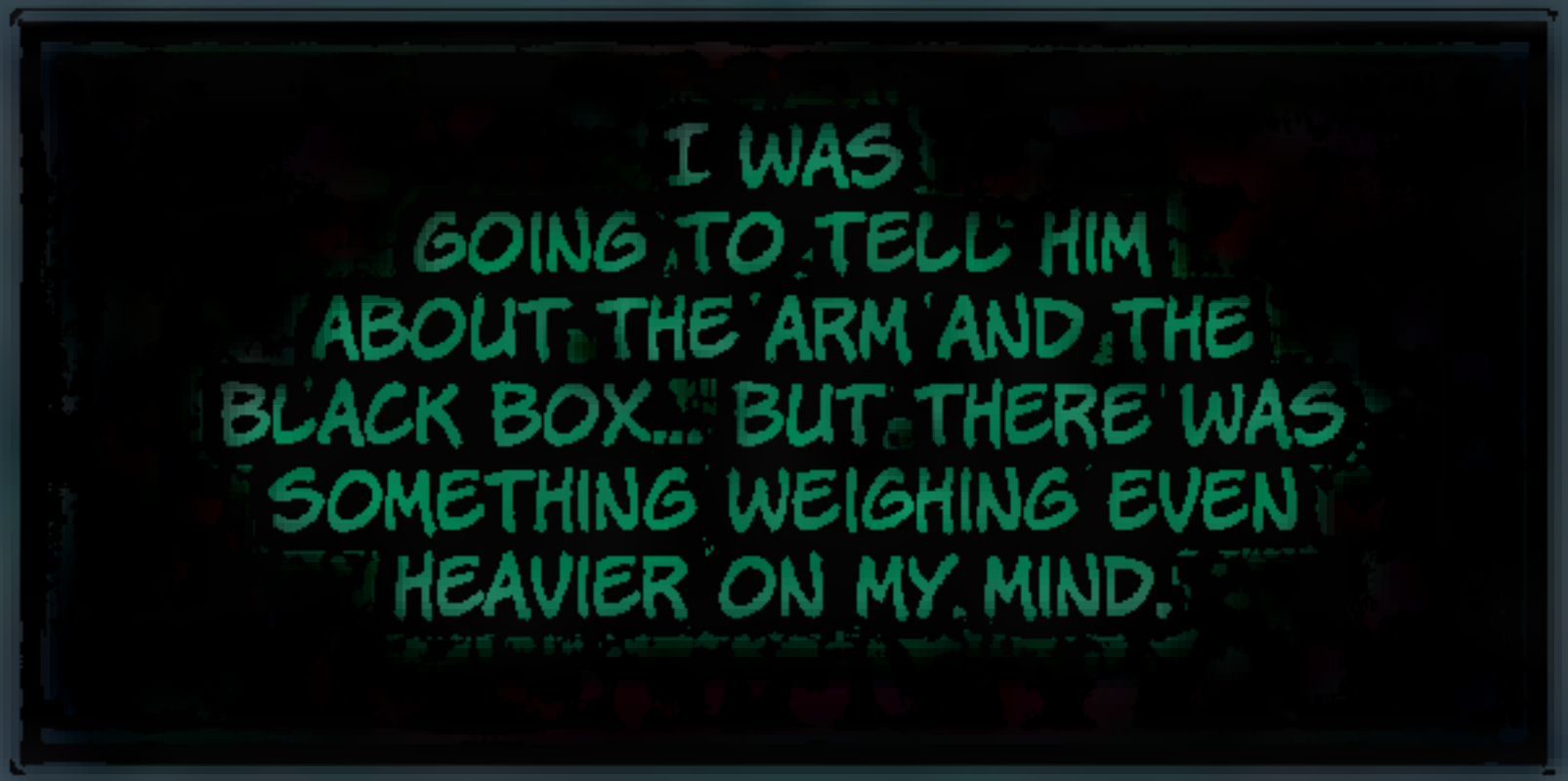
I MAY HAVE BEEN TOO DOTING...


OH WELL, I CAN START OVER.
TOSS

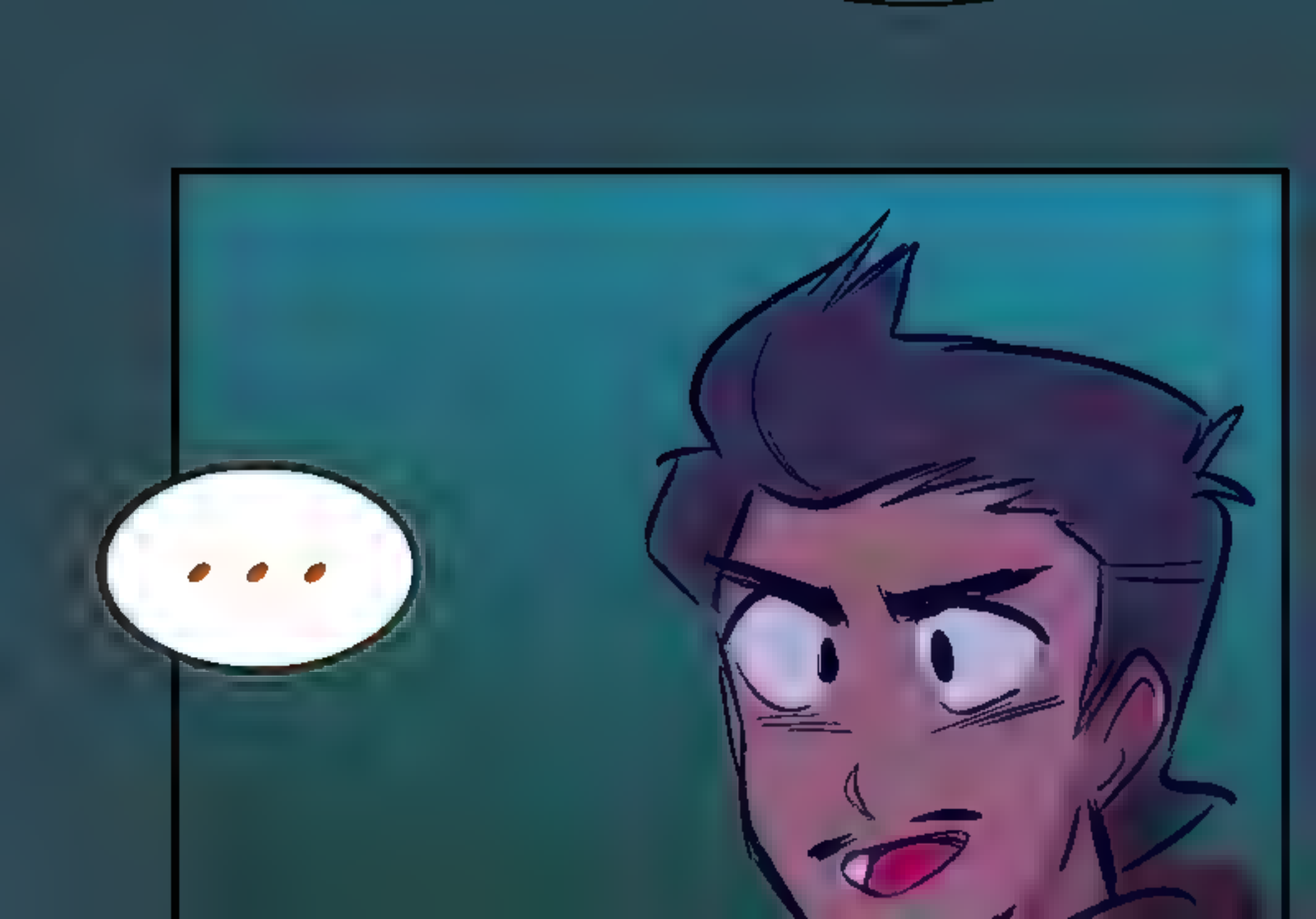
MAYBE
LESS SUNLIGHT
NEXT TIME!

I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU SINCE YOU RETURNED, AMIGO.
TO WHAT DO I OWE THIS SURPRISE VISIT?

I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT SOMETHING.


I WAS GOING TO TELL HIM ABOUT THE ARM AND THE BLACK BOX... BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING WEIGHING EVEN HEAVIER ON MY MIND.

... WAS THERE EVER SOMETHING BACK HOME THAT YOU DESPERATELY WANTED?



THAT'S A STRANGE QUESTION... WHY DO YOU ASK?

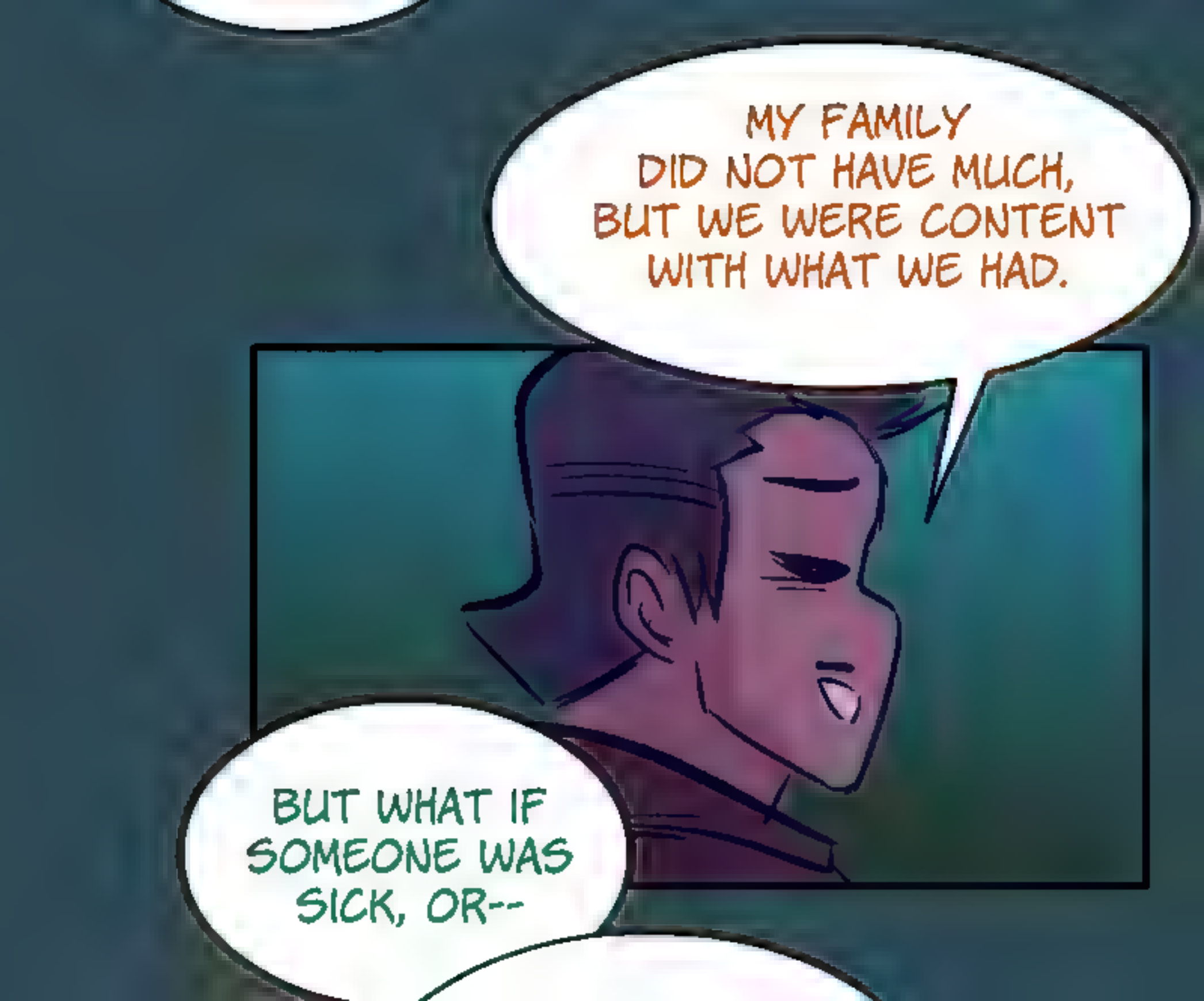
IT WAS JUST A WEIRD IDEA I HAD...

WHAT IF WE ALL MADE SOME KIND OF "DEAL WITH THE DEVIL" TO GET HERE IN EXCHANGE FOR A THING WE WANTED IN OUR LIVES... ..SOMETHING WE'D DO ANYTHING FOR...

EVEN TERRIBLE THINGS.

HMM...
NOTHING COMES
TO MIND...

BUT...
YOU MUST
HAVE WANTED
SOMETHING...


MY FAMILY DID NOT HAVE MUCH, BUT WE WERE CONTENT WITH WHAT WE HAD.
BUT WHAT IF SOMEONE WAS SICK, OR--

HOLD ON...
THIS ISN'T COMING FROM THE SHADOWS, IS IT? WHAT DID THEY WHISPER THIS TIME?

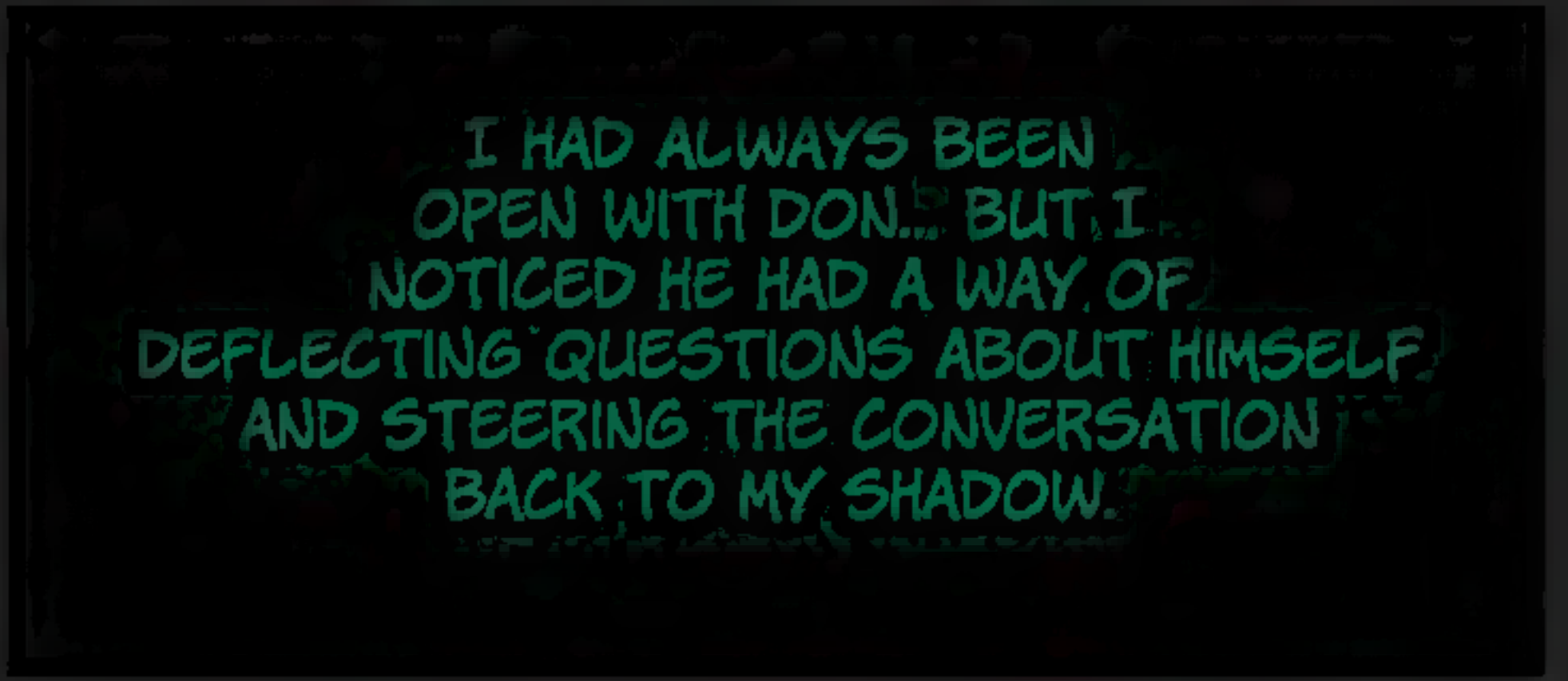
NOTHING! THIS WAS MY OWN IDEA.

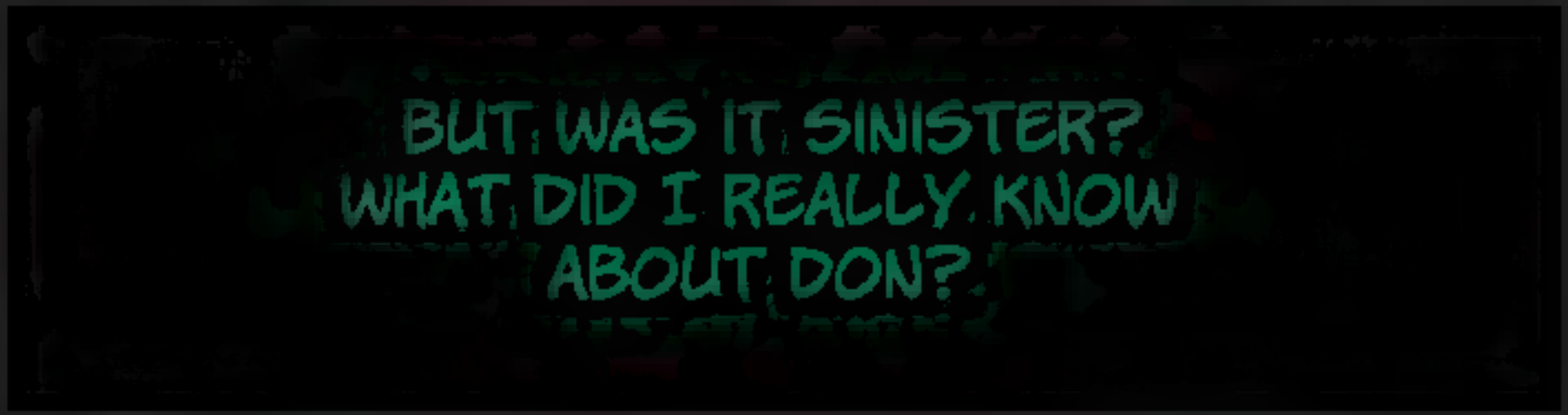
SIGH
THAT'S A RELIEF...

I'VE BEEN WORRIED THAT SOME TRAUMA YOU'D BEEN PUT THROUGH WHILE YOU WERE GONE MIGHT MAKE YOU MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO THEIR INFLUENCE.
SORRY FOR MY PARANOIA: I CAN'T HELP BUT WORRY ABOUT YOU, AMIGO.

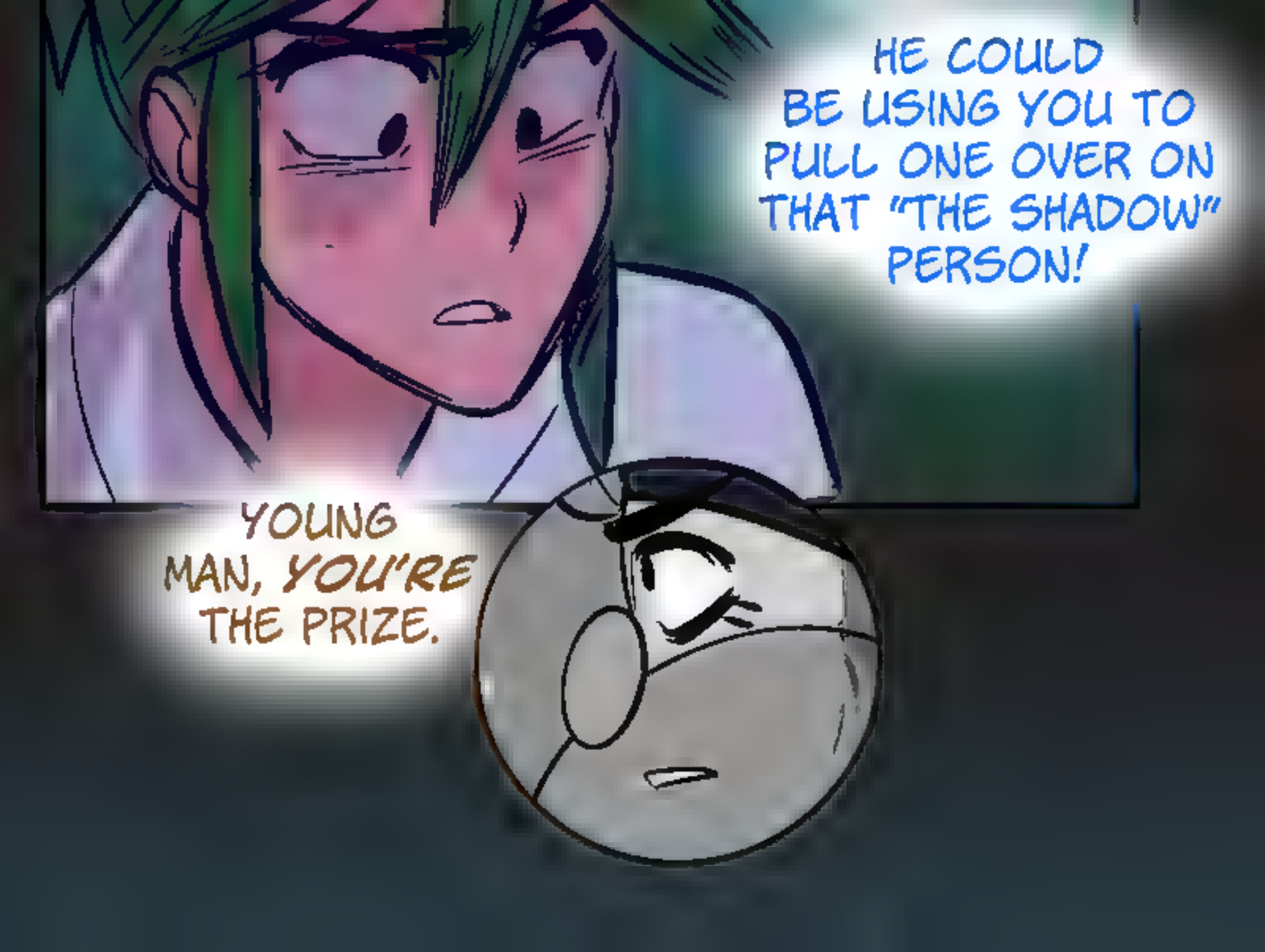
ESCUCHAME, MY CURIOUS FRIEND...
DON'T LET THIS EAT AWAY AT YOU.

YOU HAVE ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT ALREADY.
SOMETIMES THERE IS NO ANSWER.

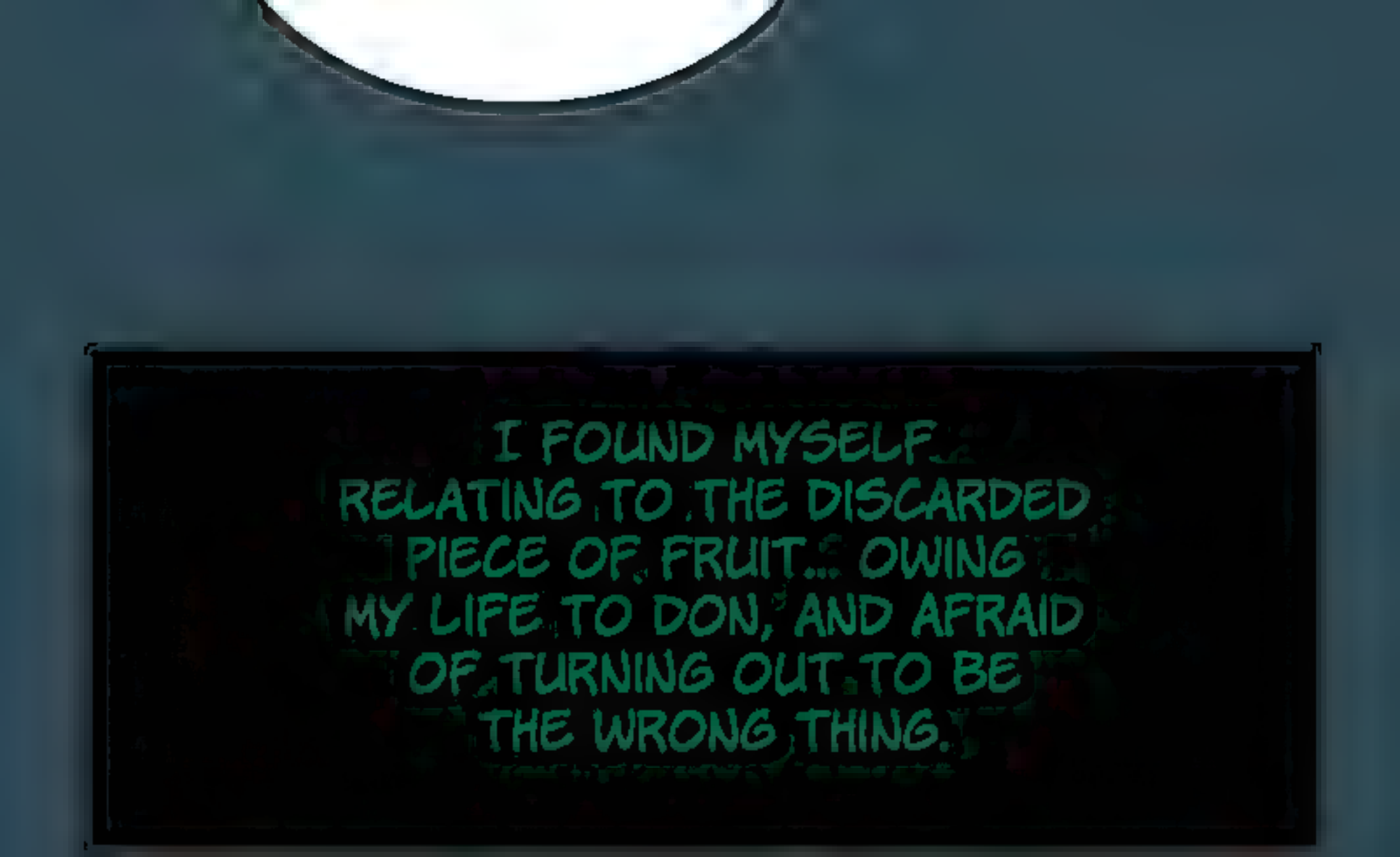

I HAD ALWAYS BEEN
OPEN WITH DON... BUT I
NOTICED HE HAD A WAY OF
DEFLECTING QUESTIONS ABOUT HIMSELF
AND STEERING THE CONVERSATION
BACK TO MY SHADOW.

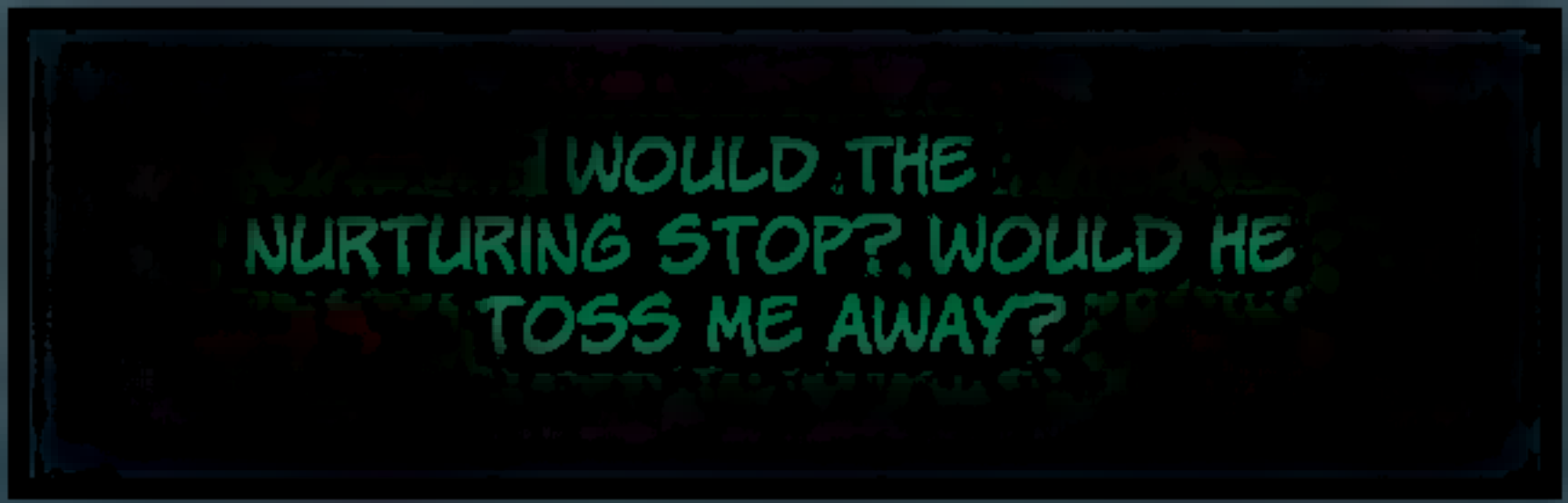

BUT WAS IT SINISTER?
WHAT DID I REALLY KNOW
ABOUT DON?

IT JUST SAYS "THE SHADOW" ... AND "DON SANTIAGO".
AHA! WHAT IF THAT'S JUST WHAT HE WANTS YOU TO THINK?


HE COULD BE USING YOU TO PULL ONE OVER ON THAT "THE SHADOW" PERSON!
YOUNG MAN, YOU'RE THE PRIZE.

THINK OF OUR DREAM!
ONCE WE'RE FREE, NONE OF THIS WILL MATTER.


I FOUND MYSELF
RELATING TO THE DISCARDED
PIECE OF FRUIT... OWING
MY LIFE TO DON, AND AFRAID
OF TURNING OUT TO BE
THE WRONG THING.


WOULD THE
NURTURING STOP?. WOULD HE
TOSS ME AWAY?

GYRUS?

ARE YOU ALRIGHT, AMIGO?
AH! SORRY... I WAS JUST THINKING YOURE RIGHT.

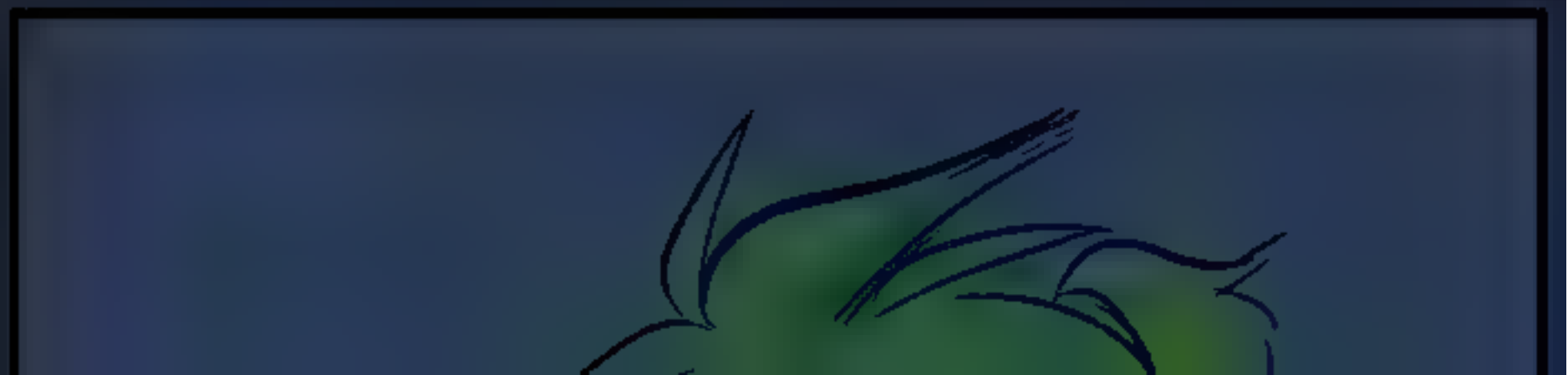
I WAS HALF ASLEEP... NOW THAT I SAY ALL THIS STUFF OUT LOUD, IT SOUNDS SILLY.

I SHOULD PROBABLY GET SOME REST.
FORGET I SAID ANYTHING, OKAY?

CONSIDER IT DONE, AMIGO!

BUT IF YOU NEED ANYTHING MORE, YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME.

I DID NEED MORE...
BUT I DIDN'T THINK I COULD DEPEND ON DON THIS TIME. I HAD TO FIND ANOTHER WAY TO QUIET MY MIND, OR ELSE I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO HOLD THE SHADOW LONG.



IT'S JUST THIS ONCE.

KNOCK
KNOCK

SILENCE...
. . .

. . .
NO ANSWER...

WHAT DID I EXPECT?
THIS WAS A BAD IDEA.

I SHOULD JUST GET OUT OF HERE.
FIND ANOTHER WAY...

TAK
TAK
SLIDE

GYRUS?
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

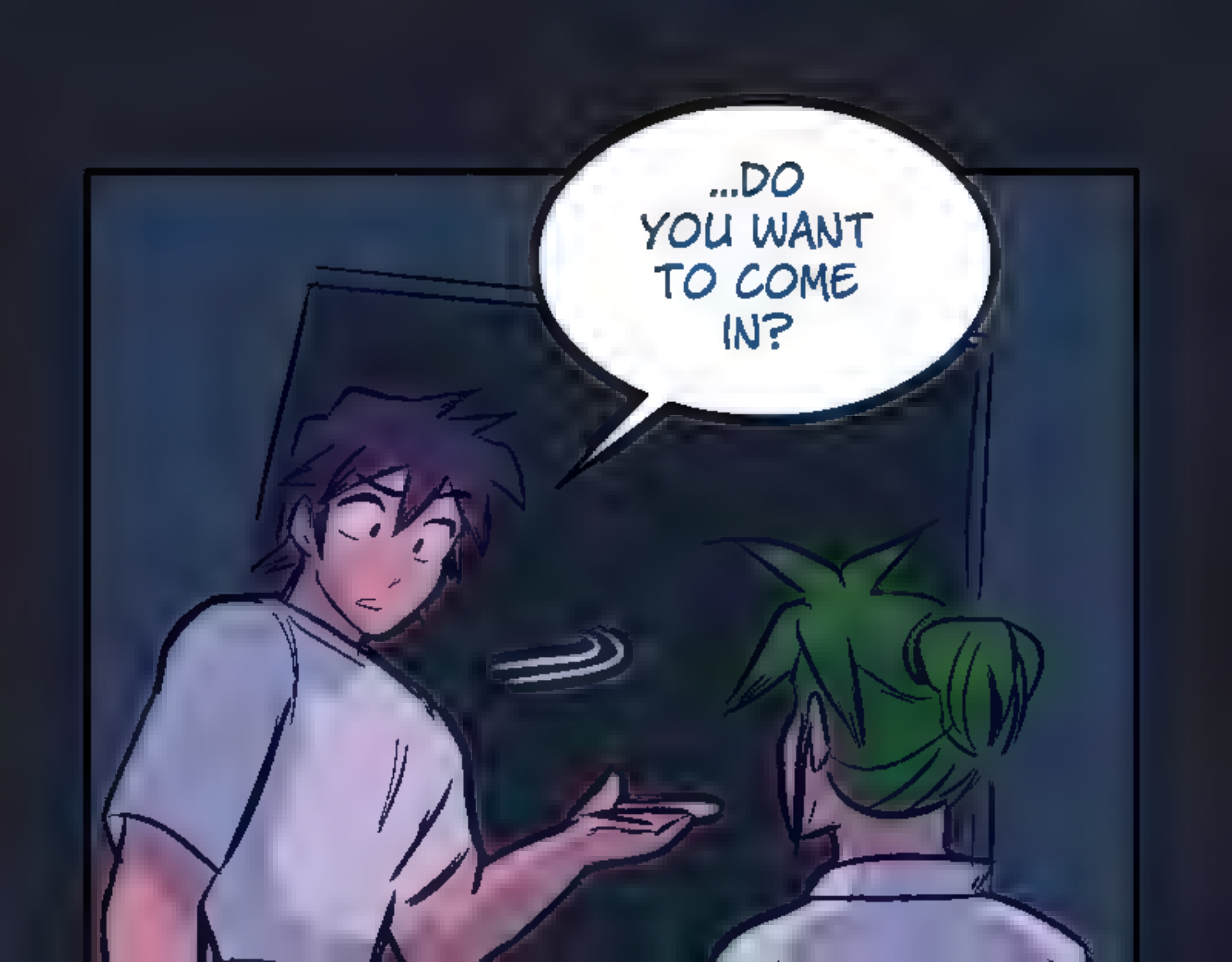
SIGH
I WANTED TO ASK YOU SOMETHING...

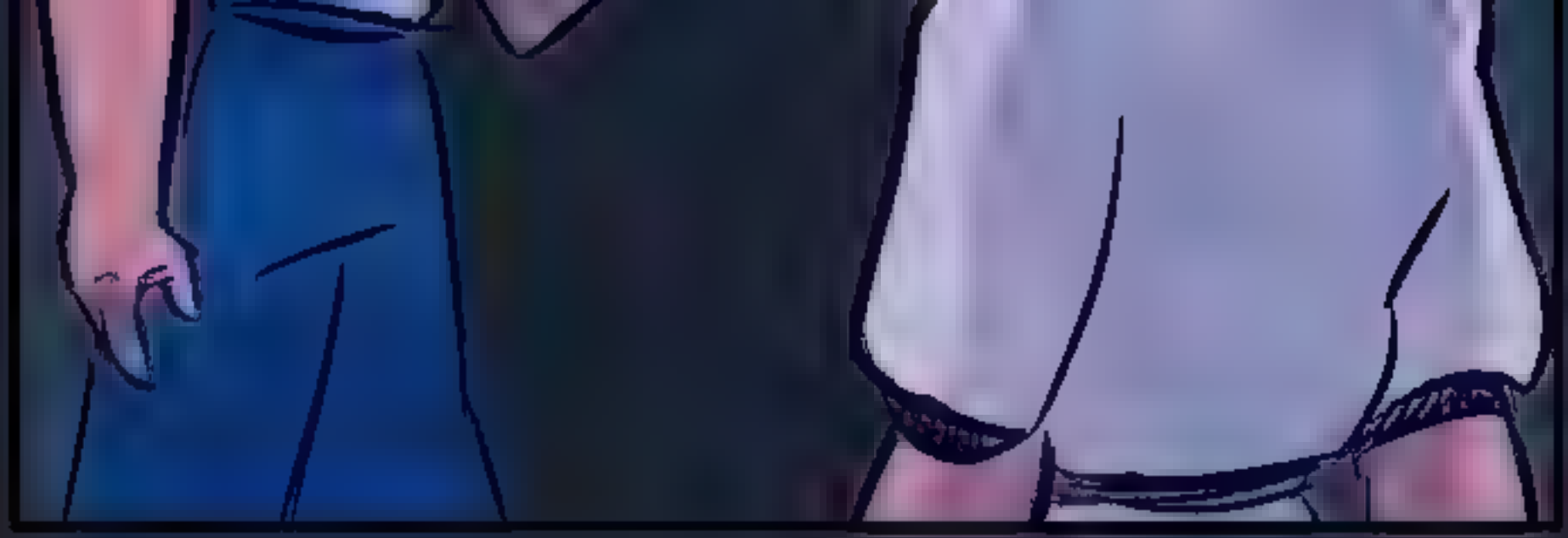
REMEMBER THE SOOTHE SPELL YOU USED TO SAVE ME FROM A SNAKE...?

I REMEMBER...
ARE YOU HERE TO APOLOGIZE FOR THAT TOO? I TOLD YOU, I WANT TO HELP--

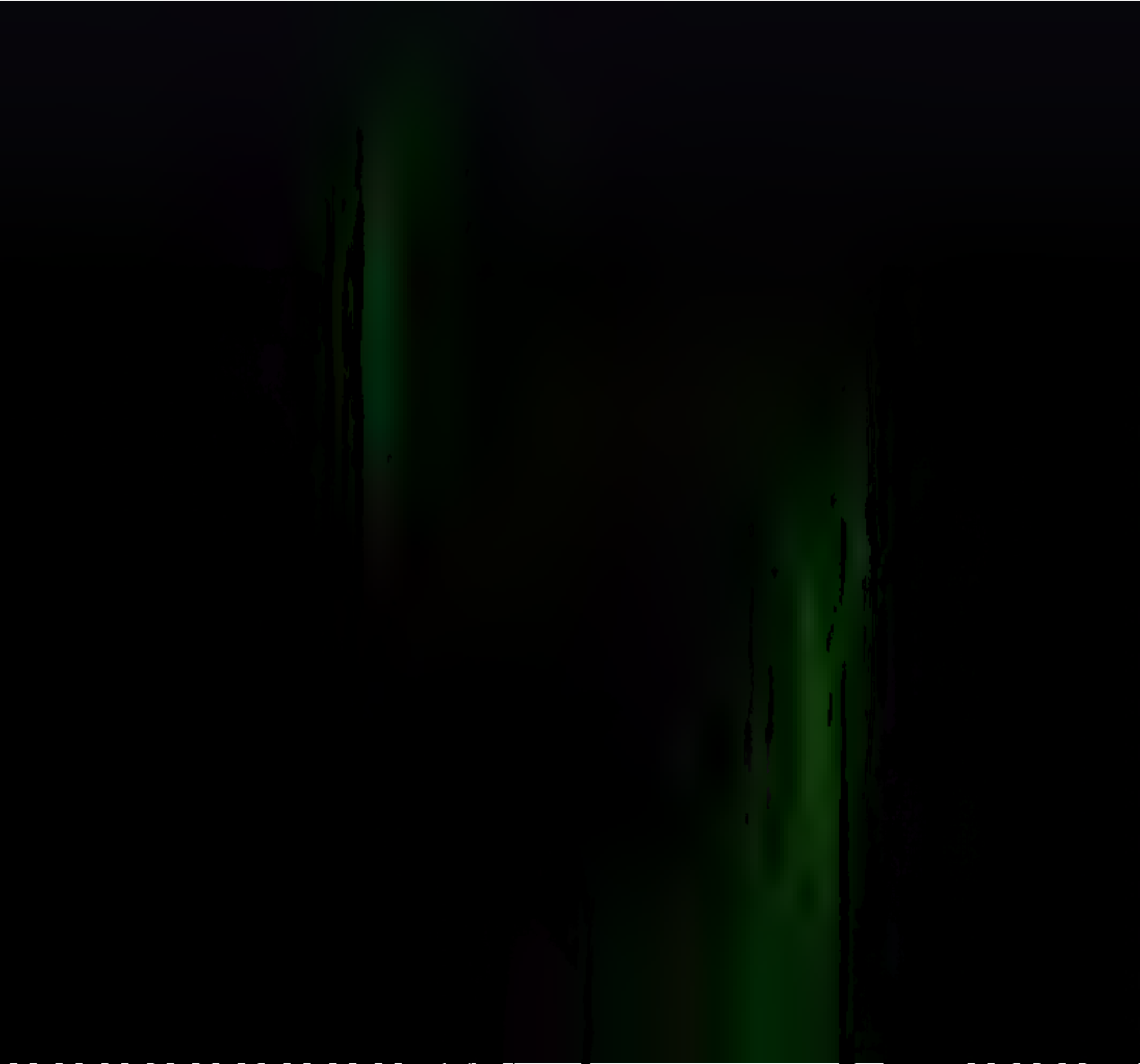
I'M
ASKING FOR
YOUR HELP!

I WANT YOU TO TRY THAT SPELL ON ME.


...DO YOU WANT TO COME IN?



SLIDE



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